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UCLA Historical Journal

Title

The Political Rebellion of Carey McWilliams

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0m91m243>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 4(0)

Author

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Publication Date

1983

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The Political Rebellion of Carey McWilliams

Greg Critser

May 1935 was an exciting, if somewhat turbulent, month for progressives in Los Angeles. Those who championed organized labor, a more enlightened outlook toward minorities, and social welfare programs saw the Supreme Court strike down important sections of the National Recovery Act, a piece of New Deal legislation designed to alleviate unemployment and labor strife. At the state level, they had witnessed a revival of efforts to free imprisoned labor organizer Tom Mooney just as officials at the University of California began a "red quiz" of professors suspected of being members of the Communist Party.

Simultaneously, the *Los Angeles Times* put many progressives on the defensive by unabashedly backing an anti-union slate of candidates for the school board. And Upton Sinclair, the progressives' standard-bearer in the lost gubernatorial race of 1934, kept embarrassing them. First he backed a lukewarm slate of Roosevelt men for the state senate, then he refused to let communists into his End Poverty in California (EPIC) party. By the end of the month, things got ugly: an EPIC convention at the Labor Temple in downtown Los Angeles erupted into a brawl of threats, catcalls, and fisticuffs.¹

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It had also been an exciting month for Carey McWilliams. Now thirty and fast becoming one of the town's more noteworthy trial attorneys, he had just been asked to serve as a trial examiner for one of the National Labor Relations Board's first hearings in Los Angeles. His literary life had also moved forward. After a hiatus of almost five years, he was working on two small books—one on his friend, the immigrant author Louis Adamic, and the other on anti-Semitism in Los Angeles. Several nationally known publications, among them the *American Mercury* and the *New Republic*, continued to publish his short pieces on politics and literature. And by late May, the *Nation*, a weekly magazine he had always admired and would one day edit, ran his first piece of social criticism.²

But the afternoon of May 29, 1935, was even more exciting, for it was on this day that McWilliams would join his friend and fellow freelance journalist Herb Klein in what they planned as a twelve-day, round-the-state, fact-finding expedition to gather information about California's farm labor problem. Into the back seat of Klein's Dodge Roadster would go the makings of what four years later would become *Factories in the Field*, McWilliams's seminal exposition of farm labor strife in the Golden State.

A look at the genesis of this book—the trip and the early depression-era experiences that led both men to undertake such a venture—sheds light on this extremely formative period of Carey McWilliams's life. Years later, McWilliams could reflect upon his activist career and recall his role as a central figure in the American left and labor movements. But he was driven toward this course largely during the years between 1930 and 1936 when the somewhat aloof, journalist/attorney increasingly became a radical social critic. Throughout this period, young McWilliams made difficult decisions about what he felt was the role of the author in a democratic society, about political affiliations, and about journalism's methods. These were decisions that would color his future world view.

What brought these two men in 1935 together to undertake such an endeavor? Klein first met McWilliams, he remembers, "sometime in 1929, most likely at Jake Zeitlin's bookstore."³ Both men were members of the so-called bohemian intellectual crowd that met there. This clique included immigrant author Louis Adamic, *Los Angeles Times* book critic Paul Jordan Smith, Westways publisher Phil Hanna, and one-day UCLA librarian Lawrence Clark Powell. Both Klein and McWilliams indulged in that world of pre-depression Menckanism, when they could afford to laugh at the American scene—at what they called "the great American circus." Both men were also early fascinated by the career of Upton Sinclair, the

socialist muckraker and author of *The Jungle*, and by 1935 both men had begun to find a common journalistic outlet in the *New Republic*, a left-leaning weekly news magazine.

But similarities aside, how did McWilliams and Klein—white, middle class, and educated—arrive at the kind of progressive sensibilities which inform such an undertaking? What changes did the early 1930s work on them? How was each “radicalized?”

Herbert Arthur Klein was born in New York City in 1907. In 1917 he moved to California and attended Stanford University, where he earned a degree in literature. Upon graduation in 1928, he landed a job as a feature writer for the liberal *Los Angeles Evening Record*. It was at this time, he remembers, that he first met Carey McWilliams.

In 1930 Klein, intrigued with the events occurring in Europe, left Los Angeles and traveled to London, where he stumbled onto a job with United Press International. He soon became interested in the German political scene and departed for Berlin, where he earned his living as a correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*. The job afforded him the opportunity to witness firsthand the rise of fascism and to view its effects on the German social structure. What he saw—Hitler’s dictatorship and the onset of fascism—startled the young man. At once he realized that an understanding of economics and social movements must come before his love of writing as an art alone. Thereafter while still on the continent Klein studied the theories of several European agricultural economists, especially impressed with those socialist-type writers who predicted the mechanization and industrialization of agricultural labor. His experience in Europe would figure deeply into the development of young Klein’s journalistic and political judgments.⁴

Klein’s interest in the relationship between land ownership and agricultural labor impressed him enough to consider a doctoral program on the subject, but Hitler’s purge of the Universität in the early years of the Nazi regime stopped Klein short. He did manage to write about the subject, however, for the *Nation*, a liberal weekly based in New York. In a 1931 article entitled “Going Through the Rye,” he presented a highly critical look at the Brüning government’s decision to continue high tariff rates that benefited Germany’s baronial landowners—the Junkers. This kind of policy was reactionary, he noted, because it perpetuated the ownership of a disproportionately large amount of land by a disproportionately small group of wealthy landed interests. “The Junkers,” he wrote, “through the million-membered Reichslandbund which they dominate, and the money which they [not the peasants] are able to lay out, have a terrific political influence. Their hold in Prussia and

in the nation did not end with the war [and] their habits are unchanged."⁵

Klein's journalistic and political sensibilities were also influenced by his friendship with Egon Erwin Kisch, the Czech communist reporter whose writings about European politics had won him the admiration of many liberal American journalists. Kisch's brand of political writing, which appeared most regularly in the fortnightly *Anti-Fascist*, was "three dimensional reporting [that] helps the reader experience the event recorded," observed Joseph North at the 1935 Western Writer's Congress.⁶ This kind of writing, or "reportage," was designed "to make the common people understand their own lives and work, to show the human experience struggling in a particular social context at a specific historical moment."⁷ It combined analysis with experience and usually culminated in a specific course of action.

Klein learned much about political reporting from Kisch. The two became fast friends and carried on an extensive correspondence in German after Klein left for the States in 1934. Klein also attempted to help Kisch raise funds necessary to escape Germany in 1939—an attempt that failed.⁸

Kisch's influence, combined with Klein's experience in Berlin and his research into the underpinnings of agricultural labor problems, wrought a profound change in Klein's journalistic inclinations:

[I] ceased to be a specialist in Robinson Jeffers and American Literature...and I was more and more intensively interested in the problems of how people live in the midst of possible plenty and yet starve. That's how my own education was forced on me by world events.

It was in Berlin perhaps more than any other part of the world, I think, that one was forced to face up to the dynamics of modern society. I mean after all...here was Germany, which had developed the greatest labor movement, the German social Democratic Party, and where nevertheless, within a few months, through terror or worse, it was possible to thrust the nation back into a state where it was apparent to me...that the Jews of Germany and the others had better get the hell out of there or they weren't going to survive. This was the time when a great many of them were saying, you know, "cool it kid, give Hitler enough rope and he'll hang himself." I felt that my nose had been rubbed into some terrible world affairs. And I felt that the aesthetic hideaway was simply intolerable.⁹

The aesthetic hideaway had grown equally intolerable to Carey McWilliams by the mid-1930s. But departing the world of Mencken did not come easy, for the young attorney's literary birthright was firmly embedded in that frothy decade of jazz, jug-gin, and baiting the "booboisie." In mid-1930 he was still at heart a literary exile, disillusioned and alienated by the crass materialism of his country. "I envy all my countrymen who at the moment live abroad," he wrote one old school chum. "I myself am contemplating becoming an expatriate."¹⁰ Too, his work as a literary critic during the period 1924-1930 bore the distinct brand of aesthetic values belonging to the so-called Lost Generation of American authors, whose literary criteria tended to be highly individualistic, art-oriented, and Euro-centered. For Malcolm Cowley, one of McWilliams's literary contemporaries, the 1920s had been a time when "we derived a sense of paradox, which became a standard for judging the writers we encountered. If they were paradoxical—if they turned platitudes upside down, showed the damage wrought by virtue, made heroes out of their villains—then they were 'moderns'—they deserved our respect."¹¹ Not surprisingly, their audience was largely limited to other artists.

A testimony to those values was McWilliams's first book, a biography of Ambrose Bierce, the Civil War author. In Bierce's life and work, the young McWilliams had found "the horrible allied with the beautiful," a powerful mythmaker who could live—indeed thrive—under the unfairness that was modern life in a postwar society.¹² For McWilliams and his downtown coterie of poets, literary critics, bibliophiles, and journalists, such literary values mirrored both an attitude and an historical circumstance. They served as a vehicle to lash out at the hypocrisy they witnessed in post-World War I American society.

But as the depression enveloped the nation and millions of Americans lost their jobs to what many viewed as the demise of capitalism, such literary aestheticism became increasingly irrelevant. As the historian Daniel Aaron notes: "If the early twenties was a period of self-discovery and self-expression, then the early thirties pointed to a period of social discovery and social expression. No longer was it possible to scoff at Main Street; now writers like Edmund Wilson were trying to understand it. Menckonian 'boob-thumping' was yielding to a 'serious interrogation,' and writers, instead of 'crying for freedom' were searching for social responsibility."¹³ Now America became the text to read. And now the common man's experience became pivotal, some of the new literati said.

McWilliams was reluctant to embrace the new code of literacy values advanced by the American critics Jay Hubbel, Norman Foster, Ralph Leslie Lusk, and Constance Rourke. These men and women saw art and artistic criticism as a way to educate by representing the experience of the common man. But first they needed an American "type." They thus turned to the language and customs embedded in traditional American folkways. Rourke, in her search for an American *jederman*, focused her attention on the tall tales found in American humor magazines in the 1830s.¹⁴ Others traveled the country and found the long-sought-for national character in regional peculiarities like festivals, folksongs, and crafts. They thought that the ending of the American frontier gave them a unique opportunity to find an indigenous American culture. "The local artist finally has to dig down into his roots," they said.

McWilliams acknowledged that there was indeed something happening in the countryside. The great expanse between the coasts was "no longer mute," he wrote in a 1930 chapbook entitled "The New Regionalism in American Literature." But he had trouble with the new set of literary standards. Such criteria, he said, "predicates a difficult act; the modern mind must will to be naive." Instead of finding something noble in the new attention to distinctly American themes, McWilliams found a soft sentimentality unsuited to the rough social and economic climate of the early 1930s. "Regionalism is anachronistic," he wrote. "The new regionalists reveal a typical modern tendency in their attempt to escape from the tumultuous present into the glamorous past." It was rather annoying, he added, to discover intelligent men and women devoting their talents to such tasks as "listing with infantile delight the eroticisms in the folk speech of taxidivers."¹⁵ He also noted that there was little novelty in their approach and that in a sense, theirs was merely a vitalized version of the wise and national provincialism that was Poe's in the early 1800s.

McWilliams's critique of the new regionalism received substantial attention, even in as unlikely a place as the *Manchester Guardian*. And what he said here shows a particularly hesitant side of McWilliams's personality—a distaste for populisms tinged with romanticism. "The supernatural effect of folklore is based on a confusion of planes that accompanies the mentality of semi-savages," he wrote. "To approximate the imagery minus the savagery is impossible."¹⁶ It was not as if he himself had not been concerned with the development of local sources of American art. His series in a local Los Angeles weekly during the latter twenties, entitled "Southern California Begins to Write," was aimed specifically at

local talent. He also collected massive amounts of literature about Mary Austin, an overlooked Southwest author. Indeed, the critical eye might discern a Southwest axis in McWilliams's version of American literary history.

But in 1930, McWilliams was still the writer detached, the aesthete in a fallen bohemia. It would take more than a tall tale and an Emersonian impulse in the arts to woo him over to the battleground of social criticism. A series of experiences in his personal and professional life is what it would take.

In the 1930s, American intellectuals, particularly progressive intellectuals, changed their attitudes toward the role of ethnic and social minorities in the United States. Since the turn of the century, anthropologists and sociologists had slowly been chipping away at the theories of racial determinism that dominated the previous century. The idea that some races were innately inferior to others fell out of favor. By the 1930s the students of Franz Boas, the father of modern anthropology, and Margaret Mead, whose *Coming of Age in Samoa* made anthropology a household academic word, succeeded in convincing a large portion of the educated class that race as a criteria for human worth or potential was not only scientifically incorrect, but politically culpable. After 1934, one scholar notes, it was "scarcely possible to graduate from an American university without being exposed to a discussion of racial differences in cultural terms. The theories of racial inferiority had lost the imprimatur of science."¹⁷

For California progressives of the 1930s, this new research blasted their older belief in "100 Percent Americanism"—the program of ethnic assimilation advanced by their forefathers three decades earlier. Those men had left the immigrant out of their plans for a socially just politique. Now, however, came the ideal of pluralism, which the new progressives saw as a way to let ethnically-diverse peoples participate in the building of a more egalitarian nation. Their critique focused too on the failings of the "system" rather than on the character of "the alien" (and his mythical corrupting influence on the "old stock" WASPs). The result was that for the first time ever California progressives included the immigrant in their plans for a more socially equitable society.¹⁸

Another equally important factor in the unmasking of nineteenth-century race fictions during the 1930s lay in the emergence of what the historian Richard Weiss has called "an ethnically diverse intelligensia that held to cosmopolitan values."¹⁹ These men and women, some of whom were second-generation immigrant Americans, played a key role in sensitizing liberal intellectuals to the concerns of

a large part of the American working class. They wrote prose, poetry, and nonfiction. They entered university life. And they stated unequivocally what the alienated psychic and social life of the immigrant in America was like.

Carey McWilliams's friend and confidant Louis Adamic was one of the most important writers contributing to the era's ethnic ambience.²⁰ Born in 1898 in the Slovenian village of Blato, then a portion of Austria-Hungary, Adamic immigrated to the United States in 1913 after being rebuked in his homeland for his radical activities in the Yugoslav National Movement. After two years as a clerk and writer for the Slovenian language paper *Glas naroda*, he enlisted in the United States Army—a rite of passage to citizenship for many an immigrant youth of his day. In 1923 he left the army and eventually settled in the Los Angeles port town of San Pedro, where he found work as a clerk in the harbormaster's station.²¹

It was at this time that McWilliams first met the striking, but somewhat stormy Adamic. McWilliams sought him out at the bequest of his friend George Sterling who urged McWilliams to look up Adamic in 1926.²² The two men immediately clicked. They had both, as Adamic would say in another context, "toyed with Menckanism." And they both thought Los Angeles a circus—McWilliams's 1926 observation that L.A. was "a harlot city"²³ matched only in tenor by Adamic's 1927 comment that Los Angeles had a form of religious "halitosis."²⁴

Adamic and McWilliams spent many hours together discussing politics, contemporary literature, and society. In 1928 they traveled together to San Francisco, stopping in Carmel to visit the poet Robinson Jeffers at his famous Tor House. It was during such time spent together that the two men began discussing Adamic's theory of Shadow America—the lonely, alienating landscape of America's immigrant psyche. This concept permeated much of Adamic's writing about immigrant life in America—writings that soon began appearing in Mencken's *American Mercury*, *Harper's*, and the *Nation*. In 1932 he wrote in his *Laughing in the Jungle* that America was "a land of deep economic, social, spiritual and intellectual chaos and distress."²⁵

Adamic's diagnosis of the immigrant's precarious life in Shadow America reached full fruition in 1935, with the publication of his highly biographical novel *Grandsons: A Story of American Lives*. Here his capacity for storytelling via crisp, clear dialogue carries his reader through the narrator's experience of the immigrant's "essential doubleness" in America. A tale about the lives of three

brothers set in post-World War I America, it is worth quoting at length:

I was caught up in this America; her beauty, wealth and size had captured my imagination and emotions; but, simultaneously, I was a bit apart. The natives were nice to me, natives of all strains, including the Mayflower multitude, but I was not entirely accepted by them. I was told I had an accent. I had come from a place called Carniola, of which no one in America seemed to have heard before. This was my luck. I could stand aside and watch at the same time that, unknown to anyone else, I was mixed up in them.²⁶

But Shadow America also affected the native American. It made for a world wherein the human community derived little if any spiritual nourishment from its surroundings. Describing the character Peter Gale, an intellectually hyperkinetic but culturally anorexic man of the late 1920s, Adamic wrote:

He was shadowy, a shadow person, no reality under or about him, just moving over the scene irrelevantly, some what like the character in a farce play, jumping about in chaos, in chaoses of all sorts, spiritual, economic . . . but which were one vast chaos together, one deep mess. Now you saw him, now you didn't see him.²⁷

"Could he help it," Adamic the narrator asked, "could *I* help it if this was a place addicted to surface appearances, top soil truth; if nearly everything in America was extrinsic, derived from without, externalized?"²⁸

McWilliams, taken with the power and insight of his friend's work, wrote *Louis Adamic and Shadow America* in 1935, a short but revealing vignette about Adamic's "graphic conception of the realities of American life, . . . [his] penetrating account of the *personal consequences* that have flowed from the circumstances under which life was settled in America and the manner in which human existence has been geared to the speed and tension of the machine."²⁹ For Colorado-born McWilliams, a young attorney then earning \$1000 a month at a prestigious downtown law firm, Adamic's diagnosis of America affected a sensitivity toward immigrants and how they would be broached in his own writing. Thus "downtrodden masses"—a patronizing phrase rampant in the lexicon of early progressive writers—is conspicuously absent from

McWilliams's work. Perhaps this is because Adamic connected the spiritual poverty of America's natives (like McWilliams) to the economic and social poverty of its newcomers. McWilliams never forgot that connection.

Another ethnic proletarian writer entered McWilliam's social circle in 1933. He was John Fante, a second-generation Italo-American who had moved from Colorado to Los Angeles during the mid 1920s. As was the case with Adamic, the two were introduced through a common literary connection, this time H. L. Mencken, who directed Fante to McWilliams after the former had read something of McWilliams's in a local newspaper.³⁰ Both men by that time had found a common literary outlet in Mencken's *American Mercury*, Mencken having published McWilliams's first essays about Ambrose Bierce, Fante having contributed short stories about second-generation immigrant life in America.

The two men met frequently and spent many a swanked evening together in one of the town's popular speakeasies. But unlike the careless image this conjures up, Fante was a serious and sensitive man when it came to his work; his views about the scars inflicted on the immigrant because of assimilation into American life were pointed. A 1932 short story for the *American Mercury* entitled "The Odyssey of a Wop" mirrored his concerns and his hatred of "100 Percent Americanism." Wrote Fante:

From the beginning I hear my mother use the words Wop and Dago with such vigor as to denote violent disrepute. She spits them out. They leap from her lips. To her, they contain the essence of poverty, squalor, filth. If I don't wash my teeth, or hang up my cap, my mother says, 'Don't be like that. Don't be a Wop.' Thus I begin to acquire her values, Wop and Dago to me become synonymous with things evil.³¹

Such themes of personal alienation and inwardly directed anger remained at the center of Fante's work throughout the thirties. His presence in McWilliams's intellectual and social life served to reinforce the lesson of Louis Adamic.

McWilliams's first journalistic piece about immigrants came in reaction to deportation and repatriation drives launched by the United States Department of Labor and Los Angeles County, against Mexican laborers. Working on the basis of two assumptions—that illegal aliens stole jobs from depression-besieged Americans, and that aliens made up an unduly large part of local welfare costs—the

Immigration Bureau initiated two weeks of raids on local fields and shops. They apprehended 269 illegals. The county was more adroit. It returned over 13,000 persons to Mexico by 1934. A climate of fear and vindictiveness convinced even legal aliens and some Mexican-American citizens to repatriate.³²

McWilliams responded to this development in a 1932 *American Mercury* article entitled "Getting Rid of the Mexican." In it, he berated former bleeding-heart social workers who had abandoned the Mexican laborers during the depression. He also chastized local government leaders, who he said regarded repatriation as "a consummate piece of statescraft," because it saved the county a reported \$340,000 in welfare costs.³³ But what really revolted McWilliams was the capricious attitude of Los Angeles industrialists:

The Los Angeles industrialists confidently predict that the Mexican can be lured back "whenever we need him." But I am not so sure of this. He may be placed on a quota basis in the meantime, or possibly he will no longer look north to Los Angeles as the goal of his dreams. At present he is probably delighted to abandon an empty paradise.

But it is difficult for his children. A friend of mine who was recently in Mazatlan, found a young Mexican girl on one of the southbound trains crying because she had to leave Belmont High School. Such an abrupt severance of the Americanization program is a contingency that the professors of sociology did not make.³⁴

McWilliams's interest in the plight of the Mexican in American society ran high throughout the 1930s. And there was here a nascent awareness of a theme he would reiterate again and again: that Americanization would not work, that it was degrading, and that there was something fundamentally wrong with a business tactic that exploited the Mexican worker's impermanent status in the American economy.

Like many American thinkers of the early 1930s who witnessed the rise of fascism abroad, McWilliams felt impelled to look for its equivalent in American society. The worldwide depression had, after all, reforged many a fragile democracy. Mussolini now ruled Italy with an iron hand, Germany's tottering Weimar Republic lurched into chaos, and Japan's short-lived democratic experiment perished from political repression and militaristic adventurism. The question many Americans asked was, "Will it happen here?"

McWilliams responded that it could, unless a sharp eye stayed focused on the increasing vigilante impulse at large in the nation. Lynchings were on the increase. Reformers proposed a radical streamlining of the country's criminal procedure laws. By 1934 McWilliams, in a piece for the *American Mercury* entitled "Fascism in American Law," warned that "the powerful, concerted nationwide drive for a summary criminal procedure points to the appearance of an unmistakably Fascist sentiment in this country." In what has since become a classic doctrine in itself, McWilliams then sketched the manner in which reactionary sentiment evolves. The first step, he wrote, "consists in the belief that America is perennially in danger of engulfment by a 'crime wave.'" The next major fiction of fascistic law reform, he said, "is that harsh sanctions, quickly applied, have a tendency to deter the commission of criminal acts." John Ruskin, McWilliams jeered, had disposed of that medieval theory in 1867. The last fiction of fascistic law reform, McWilliams said, was the belief that criminal justice in America was full of loopholes, was archaic, and thus lent itself to abuse by the ubiquitous "slick city lawyer." He concluded: "The unfortunate effect of Fascism in the law is to put the law on the defensive; to place it, and not the civilization of which it is merely a manifestation, on trial."³⁵

McWilliams himself began practicing law in 1927 when the University of Southern California graduate joined the conservative law firm of Black and Hammack. By 1933, he was handling almost all of the firm's litigation. Now he honed his skills as a courtroom attorney, working late into the night preparing for the next day's case. His law clerk from 1931 to 1936, was Joseph Enright, a graduate of the Loyola law school, supplies an insight into the young McWilliams's professional demeanor: "I have no recollection of that man ever losing his temper," he said. "Conversely, he was very firm about what he wanted to do when he started a legal matter...or a trial. You had no uncertainty about what your responsibilities were when you worked with him."³⁶ Such characteristics soon garnered McWilliams a reputation as a top civil litigator.

But representing insurance claimants for Black and Hammack did not satisfy McWilliams, and he soon became restless with the firm's principal inclinations. Occasionally conflict arose. Sent to advise a client who owned a cement company about his rights under labor laws, McWilliams returned rebuked. "Don't send that fellow out here again!" the senior Hammack was reportedly warned.³⁷

During this period of professional boredom came a series of events that would draw McWilliams closer to the radical lawyers of Los Angeles. These were the large and often dramatic farm labor strikes

which broke out first in 1930 in the Imperial Valley among Mexican and Filipino farm workers. In 1931 and 1932 came similar strikes in the San Joaquin Valley, followed in 1933 by the walkout of over eighteen thousand cotton pickers in the area. The influx of Dustbowl migrants, many of whom had been promised jobs that simply did not exist, heightened the tension in the fields. By 1934, the state—and the nation—had witnessed the most extensive agricultural strikes in United States history.

This surge of farm labor discontent met with violent and often unprovoked reprisals by the state government, vigilante groups, and business organizations. The state's Criminal Syndicalism Law was invoked to jail hundreds of union organizers for allegedly being members of the Communist Party. The anti-labor Associated Farmers broke strike lines—and heads—through the use of hired thugs and corrupt police officials. The Los Angeles Police Department's "red squad" infiltrated and broke up strikes in Orange County citrus orchards and Los Angeles vegetable fields. Vigilantes tossed tear gas canisters into crowds of striking workers.

The southern California chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, of which McWilliams had been a member since the late 1920s, responded to these outbreaks of vigilantism in a unique manner. Reflecting a particular trait of the period—the "desire to witness everything first-hand"—members of this socialistically-inclined organization banded together and held meetings in the fields of districts convulsed in labor violence. On March 24, 1934, for example, McWilliams's friend, the ACLU founder Clinton Taft, and several other attorneys addressed a crowd of workers in the strife-ridden town of Brawley, California. "What we want is a reestablishment of free speech and free assemblage in the valley," Taft told the midday crowd. "We want the Constitution to function down here inasmuch as this is part of the United States."³⁸ Reports of such activity dominated the front pages of the *Open Forum*, the ACLU's local weekly paper. So central was the farm-worker issue to the organization that it founded a special "Emergency Committee on the Imperial Valley" to combat what members saw as "an American brand of fascism."³⁹

That association—farmers and fascism—soon became entrenched in McWilliams's lexicon of social ills. In a 1934 essay for the *American Mercury* called "The Farmers Get Tough," McWilliams, now a member of the ACLU's executive committee, reflected his colleagues' concerns. Bemoaning the formation of dozens of vigilante groups by Imperial Valley farmers trying to ward off the unions and their inevitable harvest strikes, he wrote: "That blissful

liberal dream—a farm-labor alliance—has been violently dispelled by an outbreak of rural civil war in California. The alignment of forces in this conflict has left slight ground for the belief that the farmer is a potential ally, or even friend, of labor. The most striking illustration of this farmer-Fascism in California has been the revolt in the Imperial Valley. For the Imperial Valley farmers have not protested: they have revolted in the Fascist sense."⁴⁰

The "rural civil war" hit McWilliams closer to home in January 1934, when vigilantes kidnapped his friend and fellow ACLU member A.L. Wirin from his hotel room in Brawley, California. Wirin, a prominent labor attorney, was subsequently beaten and escorted to San Diego, where his car was stolen, dumped over a cliff, and destroyed.⁴¹ Another McWilliams's friend, the radical labor lawyer Leo Gallagher, suffered beatings and phony arrests.⁴² And in March of 1934 another McWilliams's associate, Grover Johnson, was forced to seek refuge in a county jail from a vigilante mob.⁴³

Such experiences introduced an emotional component into McWilliams's reportage of farm-labor strife. Increasingly, his use of the term "farmer fascism" became unqualified. Farmers themselves, in McWilliams's descriptions, became caricatured as pistol-brandishing, Bible-thumping, witch-hunting Neanderthals. "This strenuous country has no settled way of life. Social antagonisms stand forth, in sculptural simplicity, against a barren, harshly illuminated background," he wrote.⁴⁴

To a degree, McWilliams's version of the farmer illustrates one side of a curious doubleness in attitude displayed by the era's intellectuals toward the farm and farmers. On the one hand, the simple farmer, cut off from the cosmopolitanizing forces of city life, heated by the fire-and-brimstone sermons of the backwoods preacher, was seen as the locus of an American brand of fascism—a *furor americanus* of sorts. Their supposed premodern outlook made them more susceptible to simplistic, authoritarian politics, the intellectuals surmised. On the other hand, many liberal social critics were often given to eulogizing the farmer. This was the thrust of regionalists like Constance Rourke, who sought in the hinterland a noble American folk. Dorothea Lange, in her depictions of the Dustbowl migrants, also seemed to celebrate the nation's backwoods legacy.

This doubleness—this tension between what might be called a "soft" and "hard" critique of rural America—surfaced repeatedly during the decade. And it perhaps explains why the American search for a folk did not turn into a more reactionary quest for a *volk*. The two impulses tempered each other. For now, however, one strain of this tension led McWilliams to conclude that the farmers were a root

cause of an increasingly polarized political climate. He wrote:

The modern farmer is no friend of the laboring man. On the contrary, he is the best organized enemy the working man has to fight. Even by taking advantage of crop conditions, it has been extremely difficult to organize an effective strike of farm workers in California. But what is still more significant is this: the old-fashioned farmer has been supplanted by a type to which the term can no longer be applied with accuracy. The new farmer is a grower. He is only semi-rural. Often he regards his farm as a business and has it incorporated. He belongs to a number of wealthy produce exchanges; he is a director of several "protective associations." Moreover, he has a hand in state politics. He employs a bookkeeper, and, in sober truth, he looks rather like a banker. He dabbles in publicity and has learned the trick of mob-baiting. He will never be an ally of labor.⁴⁵

As vigilante group activity increased during 1934 and 1935, McWilliams became more deeply involved in his ACLU commitments. He advised the organization on matters concerning the new National Labor Relations Board law, helped defend a group of citrus workers, and wrote about theoretical problems in labor law. In December of 1934 he also became involved with the defense of James C. McLean, an organizer of the town's streetcar workers who had been framed by the Los Angeles Police Department's "red squad."⁴⁶ He also contributed his time to Dry Cleaners Union and the Newspaper Guild.⁴⁷

These cases, difficult to document in detail but nonetheless important, served to bolster McWilliams's growing activism. They sharpened his critique, honed his research skills, plugged him into a side of the farm-labor story not commonly reported in the mainstream press.

When Klein and McWilliams rekindled their friendship in early 1935, they soon found they had shared similar insights and experiences, although in different contexts. Both had witnessed the rise of fascism and seen its roots in particular agrarian landholding patterns. Both had witnessed the persecution of ethnic minorities. And both viewed with skepticism the possibility of an alliance between farmers and farm workers.

Around the country, similar decisions were being made by like-minded men and women. The desire to traverse America's hinterland

and bear witness to the effects of the Great Depression upon the lives of the common people seemed widespread, particularly among young progressive journalists. John Spivak, an American counterpart to the great Czech reporter Egon Kisch, wrote scathing documentaries about southern chain gangs and northern anti-Semitism.⁴⁸ Others later in the decade took this imaginative impulse a step further and used the camera to help bear witness. Among them were Dorothea Lange, who captured the Dustbowl migration on film for the Farm Security Administration; Walker Evans, who captured the poverty of the southern sharecropper in his seminal *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; and Margaret Bourke-White, the famous magazine photographer. Common to all these efforts, notes one scholar, was the need to get at the "texture of reality." Increasingly, these young chroniclers of the American scene, along with their readers, believed in "just what they saw, touched, handled, and—the crucial word—felt." Men and women like McWilliams, Bourke-White, Spivak, Klein, and Evans filled that need by focusing their efforts on the human experience "struggling in a particular social context at a specific historic moment."⁴⁹ For Klein and McWilliams, the former recalls, the desire to undertake such a task sprung from the realization that "the history of the social developments of California could only become comprehensible in the light of an understanding of the exploitation, recruitment, control and terrorization of agricultural labor."⁵⁰

On the afternoon of May 29, 1935, the two men began their journey by traveling up and over the rolling, scrubbrush-dotted hills of the Grapevine into Bakersfield. Their car, a cantankerous 1928 Dodge Roadster convertible, barely chugged over the grade, and then only with considerable attention by McWilliams to its constantly overheated radiator.⁵¹ The hot trip was made bearable by the pair's long talks and mutual interests. McWilliams was "a good Reisegefährter [traveling companion]" Klein wrote home that night from the Hotel Moronet in Bakersfield.⁵²

The next day they proceeded to Fresno, where they had their first encounter with labor organizers. They spoke with members—"young and very serious"—of the American Workers Party, a confederation of Muscovites and Trotskyites. They also interviewed a 70-year-old grower who, in a unique case, was himself a radical and veteran of the Pullman Strike of 1894. To get the growers' side of the story, they interviewed S. Parker Frisselle, then the head of the influential Associated Farmers, a staunchly antiunion, anticommunist organization backed by the California Farm Bureau, the California Packers Association, and the Industrial Association of San Francisco.⁵³

Departing for Sacramento on May 31, the two men continued their research at the state capitol on June 1. McWilliams went over records of the grand jury indictment of the Criminal Syndicalism prisoners, a group of eighteen labor organizers arrested for their attempts to unionize farm workers and instigate strikes for better wages and working conditions. Klein "chased relevant references at the State Library of California."⁵⁴ They finished their work by midday and rolled into San Francisco at around five that evening, checking into the Hotel Stewart.

After a Sunday of interviews with farm labor detectives and talks with McWilliams's ACLU associate Leo Gallagher, the two men proceeded on Monday to San Quentin prison, where they interviewed two of the eighteen Criminal Syndicalism prisoners.⁵⁵ The first was Pat Chambers, the hero of the 1933 peach harvest strike at Tagus Ranch, a large corporate farm near the inland town of Tulare. Chambers had helped initiate a series of successful labor actions which culminated in the cotton strike of September 1933, when thousands of pickers formed a strike line a hundred miles long that stretched from Bakersfield to Merced. Wage increases followed, but so did Chambers's arrest, the first of a series of actions taken against him by the Associated Farmers, state police, and unofficial "peace officers." When McWilliams and Klein interviewed him, he had already been in San Quentin for nearly a year. Despite that, they found Chambers in good spirits—"a wonderful person"—Klein wrote home.⁵⁶ Later on that day they spoke to Norman Mini, another of the Criminal Syndicalism prisoners who earlier that year authored one of the more comprehensive left-wing accounts of "farmer-fascism" for the *Nation*.⁵⁷ He provided McWilliams with even more material from the labor point of view. "Am feeling...very full of this big subject," Klein noted that evening. "Really we have had extraordinary luck in finding people in and getting information from them. It should be a book easy."⁵⁸

They had even better luck the next day. At the offices of the State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA), they met Nathan Gregory Silvermaster, who directed the agency's research division. A Ukrainian-born immigrant who came to the United States at age sixteen, Silvermaster had earned a twin degree in economics and philosophy from the University of California, Berkeley. As head of the research division of SERA, he directed studies of the financial condition of California counties with the express purpose of determining their ability to finance unemployment relief.⁵⁹ This was for the state an exceedingly important task relative to farm workers, a largely mobile group who made demands on different locales at

different times. Silvermaster, who was later red-baited for his membership in the American League for Peace and Freedom, revealed his suspicions about the state's growers in a report released just after his departure for Washington, D.C., to head the labor division of the Farm Resettlement Administration in 1935. "Unfortunately," he wrote, "the publicized needs for workers in various localities have been frequently exaggerated at the expense of the relief clients, who left the relief rolls voluntarily or were forced by the discontinuance of relief to seek jobs. The Relief Administration has had the embarrassment and cost of immediately accepting them."⁶⁰

Initially Silvermaster "was a bit dubious about who we were," recalls Klein, "but I think he became...impressed with Carey's sincerity, and I guess it didn't scare him too much...He loaned us this wonderful material, which...was extremely valuable. Carey and I found it an absolute goldmine. That was one of the highlights of our journey, in terms of expanding the basis of our factual, historical resources."⁶¹

Loaded down with information now, the two men proceeded southward to Salinas. Here they met the editorial staff of the *Pacific Weekly*, a Carmel-based radical magazine to which both men had previously contributed. The *Pacific Weekly*, which was edited by the radical Lincoln Steffens, his wife Ella Winter, and the intensely ideological William Bassett, was an outgrowth of *Controversy* a San Francisco-based publication.

With bold black-and-white woodblock print covers depicting noble worker struggles, the *Pacific Weekly* provided a vehicle for radical dissenters beginning with Upton Sinclair and proceeding leftward to the socialists and communists. Una Jeffers wrote its book reviews. Anna Louise Strong contributed pieces about the Soviet Union. Langston Hughes and John Steinbeck contributed short stories. Alexander Meiklejohn wrote about legal affairs, and Max Eastman chronicled eastern radical activities. Staunchly anti-fascist and pro-union, the *Pacific Weekly* advocated such progressive projects as the National Communications Federation, which would combine in an industrial union all radio and television workers, including the American Newspaper Guild. Like many radical publications of the early popular front period, the *Pacific Weekly* was hot throughout with ideological debate. Beginning in 1935, a conflict erupted between Bassett, who loved running ideological discussions about Marxism, and Ella Winter, who preferred reportage—coverage of state or local events pertaining to radical issues.⁶² The magazine also pioneered the use of participant

documentary stories. Blunt, provocative, and intensely emotional, such accounts as ex-inmate J.L. Clifton's "Truth About San Quentin" series carried titles like "Men Without Women" and "Political Prisoners."⁶³

Such a broad and experimental repertoire attracted many of the day's top labor organizers to the *Pacific Weekly's* little office in Carmel. Here, say historians Jackson Benson and Anne Loftis, is where Steinbeck met Anna Louise Strong and Mike Gold, famous figures on the radical left of that era, and George West, editorial writer for the *San Francisco News*, who later encouraged the young Steinbeck to write *The Grapes of Wrath*. It was also through Winter and Steffens, they note, "that a link was established between the Carmel-Monterey area and the union official who became Steinbeck's informant for *In Dubious Battle*."⁶⁴

A less well-known personage affiliated with the *Pacific Weekly* was Marie de L. Welch. Gifted yet grossly overlooked as a poet, McWilliams had known de L. Welch since his days as a literary critic during the 1920s.⁶⁵ One of her works—"The Nomad Harvesters"—particularly impressed McWilliams, so much so that he used it as the frontispiece for *Factories in the Field* when it appeared in book form in 1939.⁶⁶ As an example of McWilliams's changing aesthetic and literary preferences, it deserves inclusion here:

The nomads had been the followers of the flocks and the herds

Of the wildermen, the hunters, the raiders.

The harvesters had been the men of homes.

But ours is a land of nomad harvesters.

They till no ground, take no rest, are homed nowhere.

Travel with the warmth, rest in the warmth never;

Pick lettuce in the green season in the flats by the sea.

Lean, follow the ripening, homeless, send the harvest home.

Pick cherries in the amber valleys in tenderest summer.

Rest nowhere, share in no harvest.

Pick grapes in the red vineyards in the low blue hills.

Camp in the ditches at the edge of beauty.

They are a great band, they move in thousands;

Move and pause and move on.

They turn to the ripening, follow the peaks of the seasons,

Gather the fruit and leave it and move on.
Ours is a land of nomad harvesters,
Men of no root, no ground, no house, no rest;
They follow the ripening, gather the ripeness,
Rest never, ripen never,
Move and pause and move on.

It was *Pacific Weekly* editor William Bassett who expressed interest in Klein and McWilliams's research. "It was agreed that Carey and I would supply him with a set of articles, summarizing the most important of our findings," Klein recalls. "It was I [who suggested] that 'Factories in the Field' would be an appropriate, as well as euphonious or alliterative title. That was the genesis of the title."⁶⁷ To protect himself from being red-baited in the school system that he sought to work in, it was agreed to let Klein use the pen name "Clive Belmont, Jr." The two men then commenced their journey back to Los Angeles, cutting over again to Bakersfield, and arriving home late June 6 or early June 7, 1935.

Soon after McWilliams and Klein returned, they set to work gathering together the most topical parts of their research. They consulted by meeting or by phone, according to Klein's work diary, at least twice a week for the next month and a half. It was during this period that Klein discovered McWilliams's approach to writing and in particular his approach to collaboration. He was easy to work with, Klein remembers, "because he was less concerned with expanding or defending his own ego, unlike many so-called writers [who] cannot dissociate themselves from what they have written." McWilliams did not take criticism as a personal affront, Klein adds. "Carey was interested in the subject—he was interested in the *thing*, and not in self-aggrandizement or in proving himself to be a master of language and I found this extremely helpful in collaboration. Good collaboration is probably even more rare than good marriage."⁶⁸

"Cold Terror in California," the first fruit of this collaboration, appeared in the July 24, 1935 issue of the *Nation*. "Terror has broken out into the open again in California, the state nearest to the setting sun and organized fascism from above," the lead paragraph began. "The period is one of transition from sporadic vigilante activity to controlled fascism, from the clumsy violence of drunken farmers to the calculated actions of an economic militaristic machine," the two authors warned. What Klein and McWilliams referred to was the power of the Associated Farmers, whose president, S. Parker Frisselle, they had interviewed in Fresno less

than two months before. They documented the organization's relationship to the state police, told of their one-thousand-name blacklist of labor radicals—a list used by government officials in hunting down labor organizers. The authors also noted that the Associated Farmers were not, strictly speaking, a farmers' organization, but rather an alliance of large manufacturers' associations banded together for the purpose of discouraging unions in the state. In 1934 McWilliams and Klein further reported, the association helped eastern banking interests indemnify crops lost to strikers in order to crush the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union. The result of this close collaboration between law enforcement agencies, corporate interest groups, and anti-labor vigilantes, would result in an "organized terrorism in agriculture [that would produce] a system of peonage," McWilliams and Klein concluded.⁶⁹

The manner in which Klein and McWilliams presented their findings reflected the documentary or reportage mode of journalism popular during the 1930s. Like John Spivak's exposes of southern chain gangs, the two men used many direct quotations from authority figures to get at the overlooked statements that might suggest something other than what the official intended to say or indicate. Here then was an S. Parker Friselle with horns telling his constituency of "bankers, shippers and oil companies" that a farm association product with a label would "carry more weight with the public." They also quoted directly from trade journals, in this case the *Shippers and Growers Magazine*, to investigate the inside angle of corporate motivations. The case history, another popular vehicle for progressive journalists then, also appeared in the story. Describing the construction of substandard farm worker housing, they wrote:

About ten miles from Salinas, conveniently removed from the main highway, an enclosure has recently been built. A stout and unbroken wall of planks a dozen feet high forms a rectangular stockade which is divided off into several compartments on the inside, the whole occupying an acre or more. Along one wall are ranged a group outhouses, the only sign that the structure is intended for humans rather than swine. A water tower rises in solitary grandeur in the midst of a camp. Surrounding the tank is a platform, splendidly adapted for observation, night illumination and marksmanship. Flood lights are located at the four corners of the

stockade, in such a manner that they can illuminate the interior and also encircle the stockade with a clearly illuminated zone.⁷⁰

By the time the two men wrote their series for the *Pacific Weekly*, their reportage of farm labor strife became even more strident. "Capitalism," they wrote, "permeates the entire system. It remakes agriculture in its own image—and what it does not remake, it holds helpless and exploited in a kind of unprotected vassalage."⁷¹ Those words, written mid-point in the series, express most clearly the tone and tact—blunt and critical—of their approach to the study of farm labor problems in California. From a present-day perspective, it reads as unabashed Marxist analysis, the very term "farm factory" denoting the user's perspective. But it was not a particularly new analogy and approach even then. The idea, for example, that the roots of farm labor strife rested in the monopolized landholding patterns of the state's agricultural elite, was first articulated in 1919 by the socialist historian William James Ghent, who had as early as 1902 predicted the "retrogression of the social order in America to one reminiscent of feudalism in the middle ages."⁷² In a 1919 report written for the California Commission on Immigration and Housing, Ghent noted, "The great mass of the land is held by an insignificant few, who do with it as they will, and the idea of a rural society composed of many small-unit owners, each a tiller of the soil—the ideal of socially minded men in all times—is one for which there is not the slightest present basis of hope."⁷³

There was even slighter basis of hope in the 1930s, McWilliams and Klein would maintain in their update of Ghent's critique. They traced the marked and increasing concentration of land ownership, the increasing divergence of large-scale farming, and the upsurge in the use of wage labor in what they called the great "farm factories" of the San Joaquin Valley. They also criticized the demand by large growers for a "casual and fluid labor supply" that would grow and wither with their various harvesting needs.⁷⁴

But it was the nexus of corporate and state interests in such organizations as the Associated Farmers that most concerned Klein and McWilliams. "Start where you will to unravel the terrible tangle of California agricultural conditions, the strands lead to the top," they wrote. "The 'money changers' who an hour before may have been arranging a new move in the fight to break the power of the maritime unions on the waterfront are the same 'farmers' who decide in the last analysis how the hungry thousands of field workers shall fare, when they shall be cut off from relief, and when smuggled into

the state."⁷⁵

This focus on the actions of a conspiratorial power elite reflected what has come to be the chief undertaking of progressive journalists (once called muckrakers, now called investigative journalists) in American society. By holding the actions of the powerful up to the "white light" of public opinion, McWilliams and Klein attempted to answer the classic question of the decade's dispossessed Dustbowl migrant: "Then who *do* we shoot?" asked Muley Graves three years later in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*.⁷⁶ "[The] holding companies, subsidiaries, and interlocking directorates," answered McWilliams and Klein. "The same financial oligarchy maintains oppressive prices for electric power [with the help of the courts], keeps water costly, and dictates to the farmer borrowing at the local bank how much he may allow for his labor. The agents and attorneys [legal as well as non-legal and anti-legal] of the financial farm oligarchy organize fake associations of farmers, incite to vigilante violence and see that the ranks of the night riders are maintained at civil war strength when an attempt is made to organize."⁷⁷

For McWilliams, this critique, often highly polemic, politicized personal notions about power, democracy, and capital that had lingered at least since his days as an undergraduate at the University of Southern California. There was an essential unfairness in political systems, he saw then, and it was rooted in the concentration of information as well as money. One piece of fiction, a short story he wrote for the school's literary magazine at age nineteen, illustrates this early awareness. Entitled "The Prime Minister's Autobiography," McWilliams's vignette opens with a noted public official recording in his diary the day's activities. "Today has been exceedingly weary. The awful responsibilities of my office weigh heavily upon my already burdened shoulders. It seems I am fighting alone against the forces of inequity," the Prime Minister writes. Then he closes the ponderous volume, settles back on his bed and muses, "That stuff in the diary will surely make me immortal. It's a cinch, as I've already arranged for its publication. Life is very good to me these days. Things are pretty soft." The story ends with the presses of the nation hailing the publication of the Prime Minister's autobiography. "'What a saint! What a martyr! How little he dreamed that these frank, honest, straight-from-the-heart pages in his diary would ever be published! A marvelous man! A marvelous book!'"⁷⁸ McWilliams thus early perceived the disparity between what public officials did and said. By getting behind the scenes, as he did in *Factories in the Field*, McWilliams tried to illustrate that disparity.

The remaining segments of the *Pacific Weekly* series dealt with

the history of farm labor organizing efforts, the relationship of existing unions and agricultural workers, and the remedial efforts the state might take to ameliorate labor relations. This mode of dissecting social ills—history, news, reportage of human tragedies, authoritative quotes, and critical analysis—would become a model for McWilliams's later work. The approach forced him into the role of the journalist-historian. That role launched his career as a spokesman for the literary left in California—a role which would find first expression at the Western Writer's Congress (WWC) of 1936.

By the spring of 1936, it became apparent to the *Pacific Weekly* staff that an open break with editor William Bassett was inevitable. In March, Lincoln Steffens resigned over editorial disputes and magazine ownership problems. William Bassett tried to salvage the journal by forming a *Pacific Weekly* board of patrons. The attempt failed, Bassett fell out of favor with many contributors who wanted more reportage and less ideological discussion, and he left the financially hard-pressed operation in June of 1936. By then, Steffen's failing health prevented him from taking an active leadership role in the magazine.⁷⁹

These circumstances prompted Ella Winter, Steffen's wife and to a large degree the real backbone of the Carmel operation, to ask McWilliams to join the magazine's newly formed editorial board in June. Along with the poet Marie de L. Welch, writer and poet Sara Bard Field, Harry Conover, and others, she asked McWilliams to help organize a Western Writer's Congress. McWilliams accepted the offer and was immediately pitched into a five-month-long campaign to recruit participants and sponsors for the event.

The intent of the congress organizers was twofold. Like similar congresses held the year before in New York City and Boulder, Colorado, congress organizers like McWilliams saw their event as a means to fill the vacuum left by the demise of the old John Reed clubs, which once served as a unifier of radical opinion before vicious ideological infighting tore them apart. With the momentum building for a popular front of liberals, socialists, and radicals to fight fascism, such congresses were also seen as a way to promote unity and promote popular front solidarity.

The other intent of the congress was to gain additional financial support for the *Pacific Weekly* by making it the official publication of whatever permanent organization emerged from the congress. "The present idea is to keep the *Pacific Weekly* alive until after the Writer's Congress," McWilliams wrote to one organizer.⁸⁰

McWilliams's role as Southern California coordinator for the

Congress proved vital to its success in attracting sponsors and participants. At meetings in Parlor A of the Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood he held strategy meetings with area organizers.⁸¹ He also spoke about the congress on a local progressive radio hour. Through his connections with the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, he secured what he called "the best mailing list in Southern California."⁸² As sponsors, he called on Richard Neutra, the famous Los Angeles architect, Bud Schulberg, the Hollywood film producer, along with such other Hollywood people as Ring Lardner, Jr., and the Marx Brothers. To speak on the economics of writing and propaganda, he enlisted the novelist Humphrey Cobb. For round table discussion groups he secured the participation of the writers Irwin Shaw, Clarkson Crane, Hildegard Flanner, Nathaniel West, and Lawrence Clark Powell. He also invited many of the academic literati, among them Franklin Walker and Vernon Paterson.⁸³

Other major conference participants recruited by Ella Winter and WWC northern coordinator Barbara Chevalier included John Steinbeck, who spoke with William Saroyan on "Creative Problems and Criticism"; the labor writer Mike Gold; Fulmer Mood, Redfern Mason, Sara Bard Field and Marie de L. Welch of the *Pacific Weekly*; George West, the famous San Francisco editor; and Giuseppe Facci, editor of a San Francisco anti-fascist paper.

McWilliams was under pressure to invite more than just the darlings of the radical left. Humphrey Cobb, a radical whose *Paths to Glory* had two years earlier been a best-selling novel and who now worked in Hollywood as a screenwriter at the Metro Goldwyn Meyer studios, wrote McWilliams: "No harm and a lot of good might come of having all points of view represented instead of a bunch of left-wing authors applauding each others' sentiments."⁸⁴ Partly in response to such advice and partly out of his own interest, McWilliams made a concerted effort to recruit as a main speaker Upton Sinclair, now the *bête noire* of many on the far left. Chevalier then asked her husband, Haakon Chevalier, a scholar and translator of Malraux at the University of California, Berkeley, and associate of Sinclair, to help out. Sinclair continued to decline their offers until later October, when he finally gave his okay to McWilliams.⁸⁵

After five months of hectic trips to San Francisco, countless round table discussions, bickering over strategy, format, content, and time, the Western Writer's Congress opened on Friday, November 13 at 8:15 p.m. The public was invited to attend its first session, held at the Scottish Rite Auditorium on Van Ness and Sutter Streets in San Francisco. The following morning, McWilliams delivered an address entitled, "The Writer and Civil Liberties." It is a document to his

political and aesthetic evolution.

"One of the great difficulties of the moment is to make real, to make palpable, the social actualities of the day," McWilliams told his audience. Inveighing against writers who claimed that as artists they must remain detached from social issues, McWilliams noted:

It seems to me that this type of individual is, perhaps unconsciously, making several rather large assumptions. Let us say that he is the poet is whose own work many ideas find reflection. We may assume that he has drawn heavily upon recent philosophical, psychological, and scientific thought. In other words, and to belabor the obvious, he is a man of his age and the culture of his age has found reflection in his work. Yet in his attitude toward his culture he assumes a position of almost complete irresponsibility. He is apparently prepared to stand aside, while the very conditions of civilized existence are being thoroughly undermined, without giving serious thought to the question of the ultimate effect upon his work as a writer that might result from the wholesale degradation of cultural values.⁸⁶

He then went on to recount his own experiences. He talked of the "feudal despotism" at the Trona chemical plant in Death Valley where he had recently met with labor leaders trying to organize a union at the company town. He also talked of the suppression of labor organizers in the Imperial Valley and in Orange County. "Personally I am rather case-hardened by such occurrences," he said, but he was concerned that "nothing has been done to check the fascist trend which [such events] clearly foreshadow...the wholesale violation of human rights has become in California a respectable enterprise."⁸⁷

"What," McWilliams asked, "can the writer do about civil liberties?" While no one expected the single writer to go out alone and battle the forces of reaction, McWilliams thought it imperative for the modern writer to become informed about the forces responsible for violence and the abrogation of civil liberties—"to know the world in which he lives." The real problem, he said, was to encourage writers to acquire first-hand information about social issues. Another problem was to convince writers that they were not without influence. "Make no mistake about it," he said. "Writers count; they are influential. And they must be convinced that in times such as these, even their silence, on occasion, is an influence which

may further the cause of reaction." Then he waxed poetic in closing, citing the civil libertarian John Jay Chapman: "To look at the agony of a fellow human being and remain aloof means death in the heart of the on-looker," he said.⁸⁸

This message, this indictment, ran throughout the presentations of many congress participants. The author and poet C.E.S. Wood, for example, warned of aesthetic indifference caused by writers "who are like hens: they like to sit and set and brood before they hatch; but even the hen will fly when it sees a rattlesnake." Sara Bard Field implored fellow poets to unite against fascist trends in their creative life. Dorothy Parker spoke on political trends in the movie industry. Stanford education professor Holland Roberts warned of "inroads of fascism in textbooks."⁸⁹ The novelist Margaret Shield inveighed against sentimentality in story writing.

While the Congress succeeded in at least temporarily bringing together many popular front artists, it failed to adopt the *Pacific Weekly* as its official organ. The reason behind this decision throws more light onto the volatile condition of the radicals' unity. In a letter to McWilliams later that year, Ella Winter speculated on the nature of opposition to the *Pacific Weekly*. Two groups seemed to oppose it, she wrote. The first was "the old John Reeders...who want something like the old *Partisan Review* perhaps, and want, quite frankly, some paper about which they can have interminable meetings, discussions, quarrels, resolutions and what not—and just the kind of Marxian essays you are against." There was a more dangerous group of detractors in the southern part of the state, she noted. These were the anti-Nazis who were also anticommunist, many of them former New Dealers who were "against the magazine because they have tried to keep their anti-fascism away from any taint of communism."⁹⁰ These two groups proved to be incompatible with both each other and the *Pacific Weekly*.

Following their participation in the Western Writer's Congress, Klein and McWilliams's involvement with the *Pacific Weekly* gradually tapered off. Klein wrote a few more book reviews, and McWilliams contributed two more pieces of social criticism—one a critique, "Gunkist Oranges," of the giant Sunkist orange cooperative.⁹¹ But as the year wore on and Popular Front activities in Los Angeles became intense, the men's interests correspondingly receded homeward. Building an anti-Nazi front and a viable political organization to elect a more progressive governor tended to supercede their previous journalistic concerns.

For McWilliams especially, the years 1937 and 1938 saw a change of direction. In relation to research and writing, it was an inwardly

directed time. Indeed, he published virtually nothing from early 1937 until 1939. These years found him hard at work refining and enlarging *Factories in the Field*, often spending time away from his law practice to work in the stacks at the Los Angeles Public Library.⁹² Also during this period, he assumed a more active role in local politics, contributing time and money to the many progressive democratic coalitions that would eventually elect Culbert Olson as the state's governor in 1938.⁹³ Then too came more work for the ACLU in his defense of the Newspaper Guild in the *Hollywood Citizen News* strike of 1938.⁹⁴

Thus by late 1936, Carey McWilliams had moved to the very left edge of the progressive "liberal" community in Los Angeles—part of a large body of disillusioned "EPICites," socialists, and New Dealers who sought a way between the increasingly conservative bent of the Roosevelt administration on the one hand and the communists on the other. While his critique of society took on an increasingly Marxist edge, he remained formally outside of any rigidly ideological group. As one who once rejected regionalism and didactic literature, he now openly embraced proletarian literature and the new role it mandated for the writer of conscience. Consequently, his work as a writer became heavily skewed towards political reportage—a distinct departure from his former preference for literary criticism. It was a direction that would remain largely unaltered for the rest of his life.

NOTES

¹ For references to events described here I relied primarily on the *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1935, p. 1; May 17, 1935, p. 1; and May 18, 1935, sec. 2, p. 1.

² Carey McWilliams, *The Education of Carey McWilliams* (New York, 1979), 81-82; McWilliams, *Louis Adamic and Shadow American* (Los Angeles, 1935); McWilliams, *It Can Happen Here: Active Anti-Semitism in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, 1935).

³ Author's interview with Herbert A. Klein, Oct. 4, 1982, Malibu, California. Hereafter cited as Klein interview.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Herbert Klein, "Going Through the Rye: Germany's Food Tariffs," *Nation* 132 (1931), 378.

⁶ Cited in William Stott's *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York, 1973), 54.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁸ Herbert A. Klein to Upton Sinclair, and reply, ca. 1939, folder 13, Klein Collection, Special Collections, Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁹ Klein interview.

¹⁰ Carey McWilliams to J. Everett Scotten, American Consular Service, May 3, 1930, Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico, Ambrose Bierce Collection, Special Collections, Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

¹¹ Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920's* (New York, 1979; 1951), 20.

¹² Carey McWilliams, *Ambrose Bierce: A Biography* (New York, 1929), 43.

¹³ Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (New York, 1961), 173-174.

¹⁴ Constance Rourke, *American Humor* (New York, 1931).

¹⁵ Carey McWilliams, *The New Regionalism in American Literature*, (Seattle, 1930), 7, 20, 23.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30. Also see "A Bookman's Notes," *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, Feb. 4, 1931.

¹⁷ Richard Weiss, "Ethnicity and Reform: Minorities and the Ambience of the Depression Years," *Journal of American History* 66 (1979), 571.

¹⁸ For a brief discussion of the differences between pre-WWI and postwar California progressives, see G. Edward White, *Earl Warren: A Public Life* (New York, 1982), 101-103.

¹⁹ Weiss, "Ethnicity and Reform," 573.

²⁰ For an example of the increasing acceptance of ethnic writers along with a specific reference to Adamic, see "Our Foreign-Born Americans," *Wilson Bulletin for Librarians*, 9 (1934), 181.

²¹ The life of this important American author has suffered from a lack of serious scholarship. The best work to date is Henry A. Christian, *Louis Adamic: A Checklist* (Kent, Ohio, 1971), xix-xxix.

²² George Sterling to Carey McWilliams, Sept. 11, 1926, Ambrose Bierce Collection.

²³ Carey McWilliams, "Los Angeles," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*, 85 (1927), 135.

²⁴ Louis Adamic, "The Truth About Los Angeles," *Little Blue Book Series*, no. 647 (Salt Lake City, 1927), 4.

²⁵ Quoted in "Our Foreign-Born Americans," 1981.

²⁶ Louis Adamic, *Grandsons: A Story of American Lives* (New York, 1935), 80, 35, 56.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁹ McWilliams, *Louis Adamic*, 83.

³⁰ Two sources document this first meeting. The first is a letter, dated Jan. 10, 1980, written by Fante to McWilliams after the latter requested the information. The second is my interview with Fante's wife, Joyce Fante, Sept. 2, 1982, Malibu, California.

³¹ John Fante, "The Odyssey of a Wop," *American Mercury* 30 (1932), 90.

³² Francisco E. Balderrama, *In Defense of La Raza* (Tucson, 1982). See pages 15-35 for a fuller account of the deportation-repatriation drives, their effects on the Mexican-American community, and the Mexican consulate's efforts to help deportees.

³³ Carey McWilliams, "Getting Rid of the Mexican," *American Mercury*

28(1933), 323.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 324.

³⁵ Carey McWilliams, "Fascism in American Law," *American Mercury* 32 (1934), 182, 183, 188.

³⁶ Author's interview with Joseph Enright, May 2, 1982, Laguna, California. Hereafter cited as Enright interview.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Stott, *Documentary Expression*, 24. For a complete account of one of the ACLU meetings, see *Open Forum* (ACLU weekly newspaper), Mar. 24, 1934, p. 1; also see Mar. 17, 1934, p. 1.

³⁹ *Open Forum*, Apr. 7, 1934, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Carey McWilliams, "The Farmers Get Tough," *American Mercury* 33 (1934), 241.

⁴¹ *Open Forum*, Jan. 27, 1934, p. 1. See following weeks and editorials.

⁴² See McWilliams's portrait of Gallagher in Carey McWilliams, "Leo Gallagher," *Nation* 141 (1935), 437.

⁴³ McWilliams, "The Farmers Get Tough," 242.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁴⁶ *Open Forum*, Dec. 29, 1934.

⁴⁷ Enright interview.

⁴⁸ See, for example, John L. Spivak, "On the Chain Gang," *International Pamphlets Series*, no. 32 (New York, 1932).

⁴⁹ Stott, *Documentary Expression*, 28, 73.

⁵⁰ Klein interview.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Herbert A. Klein to Mina Klein, May 29, 1935, copy of letter in author's possession.

⁵³ A recount of the day's activities is in Herbert A. Klein to Mina Klein, May 30, 1935, *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Herbert A. Klein to Mina Klein, June 1, 1935, *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Herbert A. Klein to Mina Klein, June 2, 1935, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Herbert A. Klein to Mina Klein, June 3, 1935, *ibid.*

⁵⁷ See Norman Mini, "That California Dictatorship," *Nation* 140 (1935), 224-226.

⁵⁸ Klein to Klein, June 3, 1935.

⁵⁹ "Nathan Silvermaster, Economist Once Accused as Spy Dies at 65," *New York Times*, Oct. 15, 1964, sec. 2, p. 39.

⁶⁰ *Survey of Agricultural Labor Requirements in California*, 1935, (Sacramento, 1935), 2.

⁶¹ Klein interview.

⁶² The "letters to the editor" column is rife with comments on this debate. See particularly "Policy and Politics," *Pacific Weekly*, 4 (Apr. 20, 1936), p. 214. See also Ella Winter to Carey McWilliams, Dec. 26, 1936, on the latter's account of the debate, in Carey McWilliams Collection San Francisco Writers' File, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Hereafter cited as McWilliams Collection, UCB.

⁶³ The "Truth About San Quentin" series began on Mar. 30, 1936.

⁶⁴ Jackson J. Benson and Anne Loftis, "John Steinbeck and Farm Labor Unionization: The Background of *In Dubious Battle*," *American Literature* 52 (1980), 200.

⁶⁵ See Carey McWilliams, "Marie de L. Welch's Poetry," *Saturday Night* 10 (Aug. 30, 1930), p. 4.

⁶⁶ *The Nomad Harvesters* first appeared in the *Pacific Weekly* 4 (June 15, 1936), p. 345.

⁶⁷ Klein interview.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Herbert Klein and Carey McWilliams, "Cold Terror in California," *Nation* 141 (1935), 97.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁷¹ Clive Belmont, Jr., (pseud.) and Carey McWilliams, "Factories in the Field: III, Farm Ownership and Control," *Pacific Weekly* 4 (Apr. 13, 1936), p. 201.

⁷² Harold Sherburn Smith, "William James Ghent, Reformer and Historian" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1957), 78.

⁷³ Quoted in Bruno Lasky, "Feudalism in California," *The Survey* 42 (May 24, 1919), p. 310.

⁷⁴ Clive Belmont, Jr., (pseud.) and Carey McWilliams, "Factories in the Field, I: Farm Labor Demands in California," *Pacific Weekly* 4 (Mar. 30, 1936), pp. 165-166.

⁷⁵ Belmont and McWilliams, "Factories in the Field, III," p. 201.

⁷⁶ From the 1940 John Anson Ford film of the same name.

⁷⁷ Belmont and McWilliams, "Factories in the Field, III," p. 201.

⁷⁸ Carey McWilliams, "Amateur Studies in Irony: I. The Prime Minister's Autobiography," *The Wooden Horse* 1 (Mar. 1924), pp. 10-12.

⁷⁹ See Bassett's editorials, *Pacific Weekly* 4 (Mar. 13, 1936, cover), and *Pacific Weekly* 4 (Apr. 13, 1936), p. 192. See also "Policy and Politics," *ibid.* 4 (Apr. 20, 1936), p. 214; "Statement of Ownership," *ibid.* 4 (June 8, 1936), p. 336.

⁸⁰ Carey McWilliams to Baden Backus, Oct. 14, 1936, Los Angeles, California, McWilliams Collection, UCB.

⁸¹ Carey McWilliams to Barbara Chevalier, Northern WWC coordinator, Sept. 10, 1936, McWilliams Collection, UCB.

⁸² This was a weekly hour sponsored by the Los Angeles-based weekly newspaper, *The United Progressive News*. On Aug. 20, 1936, Frank Scully, a popular local journalist, wrote McWilliams: "I thought your radio spiel over KMTR on UPN hour was grand"; Carey McWilliams to Ella Winter, Oct. 14, 1936, McWilliams Collection, UCB.

⁸³ Verifications of these invitations are in the form of signed invitations, cross-checked with the agenda as it appeared in *The Pacific Weekly* 4 (Nov. 9, 1936), p. 309.

⁸⁴ Humphrey Cobb to Carey McWilliams, Sept. 14, 1936, Los Angeles, California, McWilliams Collection, UCB.

⁸⁵ Upton Sinclair to Carey McWilliams, Oct. 23, 1936, *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Carey McWilliams, "The Writer and Civil Liberties," speech reprinted in the *Open Forum*, Nov. 28, 1936, p. 1 and Dec. 5, 1936, p. 3.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Ella Winter, "Western Writer's Congress," *Pacific Weekly* 4 (Nov. 30, 1936), p. 345.

⁹⁰ Ella Winter to Carey McWilliams, (unsent letter), Dec. 26, 1936, McWilliams Collection, UCB.

⁹¹ Carey McWilliams, "Gunkist Oranges," *Pacific Weekly* 4 (July 20, 1936), pp. 38-39.

⁹² Enright interview.

⁹³ Author's interview with Eleanor (Bogigian) Hittleman, a former editor of the *United Progressive News*, Sept. 9, 1982, Marina del Rey, California. *United Progressive News* articles verify her accounts of McWilliams, as does my interview with longtime McWilliams's associate, Joseph Aidlin, May 25, 1982, Los Angeles, California.

⁹⁴ For accounts of McWilliams's involvement, see *Hollywood Citizen News Striker*, May 17, 1938, May 20, 1938, June 15, 1938, and June 22, 1938, box 9, Rube Borogh Collection, Special Collections, Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles