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## Carey McWilliams: The California Years

By Peter Richardson

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I'd like to talk with you today about Carey McWilliams, the Los Angeles attorney, activist, and author who chaired the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee. As you know, that committee helped free a group of mostly Latino youths convicted of murder following a demonstrably biased trial in Los Angeles during World War II. I'd like to give you a sense of how McWilliams became involved in the appeal and then place that effort in the context of his long and busy career. In fact, the Sleepy Lagoon appeal occurred during an intensely productive period of McWilliams's life, a period that makes up the central part of his overall achievement and legacy.

First, who was Carey McWilliams? He may be the most important American public intellectual you've never heard of, especially if you were born after 1960. If you have heard of him, you probably know that he was a Los Angeles author, attorney, and activist and editor of *The Nation* from 1955 to 1975. I had no idea who he was until six years ago, when I began working as an editor at the Public Policy Institute of California in San Francisco. At that time, I asked Peter Schrag of the *Sacramento Bee* what I should read by way of background for

my new job. He said everything by Carey McWilliams, who was editing *The Nation* when Peter began his career as a journalist.

Peter's recommendation was a tall order, largely because McWilliams's output was staggering. Between 1939 and 1950 alone, he wrote nine very good books and over 200 articles on farm labor, racial and ethnic prejudice, the Japanese-American internment, California politics and culture, the history of Spanish-speaking America, and the anti-Communist hysteria of that period. I had to force myself to read McWilliams's two books about California (*Southern California Country: An Island on the Land* and *California: The Great Exception*), mostly because it's difficult to read popular histories written half a century ago—a lot has happened since then! But his writing was so lucid, his vision so clear, and his predictions so accurate that I wanted to learn more about him. One of the things I learned was that Robert Towne's original screenplay for *Chinatown*, perhaps my favorite Hollywood film, was based on a book McWilliams wrote in 1946. Another was that César Chávez said he learned most of what he knew about California agribusiness from McWilliams. Another was that Luis Valdez's play and film *Zoot Suit* owe some part of their content to McWilliams's writing and advocacy. Another was that McWilliams gave Hunter S. Thompson his first big break by commissioning an article on the Hell's Angels that led to Thompson's first bestseller. I'll return to McWilliams's influence later on, but I hope these few facts suggest something of its breadth—even if that influence is mostly invisible today.

I want to focus today on McWilliams's years in California, especially the 1930s and 1940s. First, some background. McWilliams came to Los Angeles only after his father, a prosperous rancher and state legislator in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, lost everything—his fortune, his mind, and his life—just after World War I. Jerry McWilliams had invested heavily in cattle and was wiped out when the beef embargo was lifted after the war. He died in a Colorado mental hospital, perhaps of suicide, while McWilliams was in high school. It was a powerful trauma for McWilliams, and it shaped his personality and views. His main psychic defenses became intellectualization, a retreat from affect, and steady recourse to alcohol, especially as a young man. His father's demise also shaped his ideas. In effect, McWilliams had a choice: He could blame his father or "the system" for his father's misfortune. McWilliams chose to blame the system, and for the rest of his life, he had grave misgivings about free enterprise. For him, markets weren't mechanisms for producing wealth and distributing goods and services; instead, they were wild forces that tore men's souls to pieces.

As a boy in Steamboat Springs, McWilliams read extensively. His favorites were H.L. Mencken (especially the magazine he edited, the *Smart Set*) and the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald, especially *This Side of Paradise*. Mencken would be his earliest and most important professional model, and Fitzgerald's novel about Ivy League swells fired his imagination. Throughout the 1920s, McWilliams would live out the Jazz Age ethos as he understood it from Mencken and Fitzgerald. But that way of life led to some problems. During his freshman

year at the University of Denver, where he had received a scholarship, he was expelled after a raucous St. Patrick's Day party. Broke and besmirched, he came to Los Angeles to join his mother and extended family. He found a job at the *Los Angeles Times* in the credit department, where he tracked down deadbeat advertisers, a task that did little to improve his opinion of the business community. He also attended USC, where he worked on the school paper as well as the campus literary and humor journals. But after a gin-fueled double date, he was suspended from USC, too. He spent the semester at Southern Branch (later renamed UCLA) and returned to complete law school at USC.

The law degree was for practicality's sake. Although he soon became a proficient litigator at a downtown law firm, he never liked the work. His real goal was to become a writer—a younger, Western version of H.L. Mencken. He also harbored ambitions of writing the Los Angeles equivalent of Joyce's *Dubliners*. When he wasn't working on legal cases, he wrote literary reviews for local magazines and quickly became a kind of regional tastemaker. At the tender age of 23, he completed his first book, a well-received biography of the Western journalist Ambrose Bierce, one of Mencken's favorites. Around that time, too, he became a junior partner in his law firm. He was laying the foundations for two careers—one legal, the other literary—that would eventually come together in his political writing and activism.

Throughout the 1920s, McWilliams was largely apolitical, but like many of his generation, he was radicalized by the 1930s. The Depression deepened his

belief that market forces were irrational and dangerous, especially but not only to immigrants, minorities, and workers. As a lawyer, he sought out opportunities to represent workers in and around Los Angeles, and he focused on farm labor issues. He wrote his first bestseller, *Factories in the Field*, in 1939 – the same year John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* became a hugely successful novel and film. In McWilliams’s view, the farm workers Steinbeck portrayed became a political issue for a specific reason. California agribusiness had always depended on a mobile, disenfranchised labor force. But for the first time, white American citizens – Dust Bowl migrants, in this case – were feeling the effects of that system. Instead of moving on after the harvest, they settled in California towns and even collected public benefits.

For his efforts on the farm labor issue, McWilliams was appointed chief of California’s Division of Immigration and Housing in 1939. He focused on housing and higher wages for farm workers and became a high-profile target for California growers, who called him “Agricultural Pest Number One, worse than pear blight or boll weevils.” When Earl Warren ran for governor in 1942, he promised his audiences in the Central Valley that his first official act would be to fire McWilliams. The FBI began spying on him – in fact, J. Edgar Hoover put him on his Security Index, which meant he would be considered for detention in case of a national emergency, even though McWilliams was serving in state government at the time. State legislators like Sam Yorty hauled him before their committees and grilled him on his political views; mostly they wanted him to

confirm or deny that he was a Communist. He wasn't a member of the Communist Party, but he had many friends and colleagues who were, and he never hesitated to work with them when they agreed on an issue.

To understand what McWilliams was up against during this time, I'd like to read an excerpt from McWilliams's testimony before the Committee on Un-American Activities in California, which was chaired by Los Angeles State Senator Jack Tenney. Tenney had risen through the ranks of the musicians union and was considered a left-wing firebrand in the 1930s. But when he lost his position as president of the local, he blamed Communists and began a crusade against them. He included McWilliams in that group and smeared him relentlessly throughout the 1940s. About five years ago, a California court ordered that the transcripts from these public hearings be made available, but the Tenney Committee questioned McWilliams in a closed hearing, so the transcript has never been published. McWilliams had just written a book called *Brothers Under the Skin*, which recounted the histories of America's largest minority groups and called for federal protections against discrimination. Tenney was more interested in McWilliams's thoughts on interracial marriage, which was illegal in California at that time. Here's an edited excerpt from that exchange.

Chairman Tenney: Q. I would like to ask you what you think of miscegenation?

A. I think miscegenation statutes are a reflection of prejudice in the community.

Q. You think they should be abolished?

A. I do ...

Q. Well, with the repeal of those statutes then, of course, marriage between various races would be permissible and legal, and would you advocate that?

A. Mr. Tenney, it would be presumptuous (*sic*) to advocate those marriages. I am not advocating anyone marry; I'm saying that these miscegenation statutes do not accomplish the purpose for which they were passed in the first instance. I think they should be repealed; I think they are symbolic of existing prejudice in the communities, and I feel this to the very degree, and I might say there is a considerable weight of opinion to sustain this judgment, to the very degree the negro race in the United States raises in the social statute (*sic*) in education and so forth, to that very extent you will have less interracial mixture than you have now, when they are, remember, at a disadvantage as a racial minority group in the United States.



Q. I don't think you have answered my question.

A. You can repeat it. I think I have.

Q. I say, do you favor intermarriage?

A. I say it is presumptuous (*sic*) upon me to say that 'A' should marry 'B.'

Q. I understand. I am not talking about 'A' and 'B.' I am talking about the negroes and the whites.

A. I am not advocating. I think the prohibition should be removed.

As one observer noted after Bertolt Brecht's appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee, this was like watching a zoologist being interrogated by apes. In his committee report, Tenney wrote that McWilliams's views on interracial marriage followed the Communist Party line. Later, Tenney self-destructed under the weight of his own smears and accusations. But even to argue, as McWilliams did, that Latino children in Pomona should be able to swim in the public pools every day, and not just on designated days, was to attract those kinds of accusations.

Two weeks before Tenney questioned McWilliams, the Zoot Suit Riots were in the news. In 1943, some scuffles in Los Angeles between Latinos and sailors spun out of control. The local newspapers hyped the story, and

thousands of residents flocked downtown to watch sailors and Marines sweep through the city, attacking and sometimes stripping the clothing off young Latino men while the police did little to stop the violence. McWilliams's response was three-pronged. As a journalist, he covered the mayhem for various publications. As a representative of the National Lawyers Guild, he called for a federal investigation of the Los Angeles Police Department, which did little aside from arresting Latino victims. And as a citizen activist, he used his influence with his friend and state attorney general, Robert Kenny, to suggest a gubernatorial commission to calm the city. Governor Warren formed the commission, the Navy suspended shore leave, and the troubles subsided.

Throughout this time, the Sleepy Lagoon trial and appeal were unfolding. McWilliams wasn't involved with the case initially, but after several defendants were convicted and sent to San Quentin, he was asked to chair the defense committee and build support for the appeal. He agreed on three conditions: that the committee's books be audited after the appeal, that the committee be broadened, and that new counsel be hired. The audit was meant to deflect the inevitable criticism that the Communist Party was using the committee to raise funds for itself. He also wanted to broaden the committee to make sure it wasn't perceived as an effort of the radical left. Finally, he thought new counsel would be more effective, and because he was heading the Los Angeles chapter of the National Lawyers Guild at the time, he had plenty of connections to draw on. Although McWilliams recruited some Hollywood stars

and community leaders for the appeal, he was always quick to point out that Alice McGrath did the heavy lifting on the committee. After the convictions were voided and the defendants were freed, McWilliams regarded the Sleepy Lagoon affair as the beginning of the Chicano movement.

When he left government after Warren's election in 1942, McWilliams turned to another issue: the evacuation and internment of more than 100,000 Japanese-American citizens. The internment happened on his watch, so to speak, while he was serving under a Democratic governor and Democratic president. Although he had deep misgivings about that decision and worked behind the scenes to prevent it, he didn't criticize the decision publicly. But once he was out of government, he wrote *Prejudice*—a brave, commanding, and sometimes disturbing book that came out in 1944, while the nation was still at war and the camps were still operating. The same year, *Prejudice* was cited repeatedly in a Supreme Court dissenting opinion in *Korematsu v. United States*, which upheld the constitutionality of the internment. Later, the Supreme Court reversed that decision.

If McWilliams had done nothing else during the 1940s, his would be a remarkable record. But he did much more. Among other things, he published scores of articles in national journals as well as six more first-rate books: *Ill Fares the Land* (1941), *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land* (1946), *A Mask for Privilege: Anti-Semitism in America* (1948), *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (1949), *California: The Great Exception* (1949),

and *Witch Hunt: The Revival of Heresy* (1950). He was also involved in one more high-profile legal case before he moved to New York to edit *The Nation*. That was the case of the so-called Hollywood Ten, a group of film industry leftists whom the House Un-American Activities Committee had summoned to Washington, D.C., for questioning about their political associations. After consulting with their lawyers, the Hollywood Ten decided not to offer direct answers to any questions about Communist Party membership. The hearings turned out to be a spectacle, and the Hollywood Ten were convicted of contempt of Congress. McWilliams drafted an *amicus* brief for a Supreme Court hearing on their behalf, but the court decided not to hear the case, and the defendants served time in federal prison. That decision, too, was later reversed by the Supreme Court.

McWilliams moved to New York in 1951 to edit *The Nation*. He devoted a great deal of his time and energy to resisting McCarthyism, which led historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to brand him and his associates “dough-faced Typhoid Marys of the left.” But his stands on McCarthyism, civil rights, and Vietnam eventually earned him a reputation among liberals and progressives for being right on the big issues. As editor of *The Nation*, he was also known for reactivating the American tradition of muckraking, converting what had been known as a journal of opinion into a forum for investigative reporting. Along the way, he gave many young people their start by publishing them in *The Nation*. That group included Ralph Nader and Howard Zinn along with Hunter

S. Thompson. But for all his good work at *The Nation*, his achievements in California are the crown jewels of his career. His books hold up extremely well, even after two generations, and his influence, as I suggested earlier, continues to register in a wide variety of academic works on race and ethnicity, labor history, even city planning.

*North from Mexico*, for example, turned out to be a very important work, and it continues to generate an interesting range of responses. The vast majority of these responses are laudatory but not always very penetrating. A few reflect what Harold Bloom would call an “anxiety of influence” – that uneasy feeling among writers that their best thoughts have already been expressed by someone else. (Or, as Bloom puts it, that unnerving feeling that a dead man’s voice is outrageously more alive than our own.) That anxiety often leads to misreadings and oversimplifications, which scholars should work hard to resist, but it’s also evidence of a writer’s power. In some cases, scholars have tried to dismiss McWilliams to clear the stage for their own arguments; but in the end, their claims often look remarkably like the ones he made two generations ago. Both responses – uncritical admiration and anxious dismissal – lead us away from the careful, balanced readings that McWilliams’s work deserves.

By way of review, then, let me sum up McWilliams’s achievement between 1939 and 1950. He wrote nine books and more than 200 articles. He served in state government for four years. He was West Coast editor of *The Nation* after 1946. He was active in three landmark cases: Sleepy Lagoon,

*Korematsu v. United States*, and the Hollywood Ten. Finally, he was an early warning system on McCarthyism and Richard Nixon, whom he described in 1950 as “a dapper little man with an astonishing capacity for petty malice.” In addition to inspiring activists (for example, Chávez) and artists (for example, Towne), McWilliams’s work became both a source of and topic for subsequent Western historians and writers. A very partial list would include Patricia Limerick, Kevin Starr, Williams Deverell, Mike Davis, John Gregory Dunne, Peter Schrag, James Houston, Gerald Haslam, and Reagan biographer Lou Cannon.

In *American Prophet: The Life and Work of Carey McWilliams*, I argue that McWilliams’s cool analysis, clear vision, trenchant prose, extraordinary range, and intense civic engagement make him a very attractive figure to a new generation of academic readers. I also review some of the laudatory comments McWilliams and his work have received. For example, Kevin Starr calls him “the finest nonfiction writer on California – ever.” Patricia Limerick dubs him “California’s preeminent public intellectual,” and Mike Davis considers him “the Walter Prescott Webb of California, if not its Fernand Braudel.” But I think even these aficionados underestimate McWilliams by focusing on his regional importance. In addition to being California’s preeminent intellectual, he may have been America’s most versatile public intellectual of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Who else could litigate a case, write a biography, critique modern poetry and fiction, serve in state government, intervene successfully in a murder appeal and urban

riot, draft a Supreme Court brief for one case, be cited in a dissenting opinion for another, write hundreds of articles and a dozen first-rate books, and edit a distinguished national journal for two decades? Imagine Cornel West writing a Supreme Court brief, Noam Chomsky critiquing Yeats's poetry, or Gore Vidal running a state agency, and I think you'll begin to appreciate McWilliams's most extraordinary gift.

There is one final item to add to this assessment. McWilliams was asked to help with many causes during this time, and as a result, he attracted a great deal of hostility, accusations, and government surveillance. For him, these were the wages of dissent. During the McCarthy era, these pressures would undo many of his close friends, several of whom committed suicide. It is entirely appropriate to recognize McWilliams for his prescience, lucidity, productivity, and versatility. Indeed, that recognition is long overdue. But as Studs Terkel noted in the late 1970s, we should also recognize McWilliams for another, more basic quality: his guts.