

PARADISE

A CAREY McWILLIAMS READER



Introduction by Gray Brechin

FOREWORD BY WILSON CAREY McWILLIAMS

Introduction

Artist Frank Du Mond painted the kind of California history that most of us learned in high school. In one panel painted for San Francisco's 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exhibition, youthful pioneers leave the elderly behind on New England's cold and rocky shores. In its companion, they enter the Golden State, capes billowing, as an allegorical figure of California and a joyous chorus of native sons welcome them to a promised land replete with oranges, grapes, and gold. Playing the losers in this pageant, natty Spanish explorers and a pious padre bring up the rear. California Indians and Asians have fallen out of the picture frame altogether.

Inspired by depictions of Roman triumphal marches, Du Mond's figures in these two panels are overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon and predominately male. He gives viewers an ascensional view of history, imbuing the present state of California—and the nation to which it nominally belongs—with the legitimacy and mythic destiny of heroic argonauts. No conflict mars the westward course of empire.¹

Carey McWilliams filled in the many omissions from that kind of comforting history. Had *he* painted those murals, they would have featured not a march but a rout of races and classes in a land beleaguered by their growing demands upon it. More than anyone of his time, McWilliams peeled back the giddy and gaudy orange-crate label of official state history to reveal the disturbing reality of what California is and has been for those not included in Du Mond's parade.

That he did so *when* he did yanks the rug from beneath an argument dear to cultural reactionaries—namely, that historians should not attempt to impose the values of a presumably more enlightened age upon the benighted

past. McWilliams's prodigious output of writing demonstrates that the demand for social justice is nothing new, that radical voices in the past sought the root cause and remedy of social problems then as they do today. And just as they are today, such voices were usually maligned and marginalized by those who, through their ownership of the mass media, determined where the mainstream would flow. For those of us who lean unapologetically to the left as it flows ever farther to the right, encountering the writings of Carey McWilliams is like running into an old friend in a foreign city.

If I were to paint the unruly and often pugnacious procession to which McWilliams belongs, I would include Josiah Royce, Henry George, John Muir, Fremont Older, Charlotte Perkins, Upton Sinclair, Delilah Beasley, Lincoln Steffens, and Robinson Jeffers. Each in his or her own way courageously challenged received wisdom and common practice, and most paid a price for doing so. Doubtless there were many more, such as the Yurok champion of Indian rights Lucy Thompson, whose race or class or inarticulateness in English denied them the public forum. Socialist Michael Harrington wrote that such people constitute the secret history of the United States.

McWilliams wrote much of that history, giving voice to the voiceless and holding a mirror up to a state which, like Norma Desmond, the faded star in *Sunset Boulevard*, had convinced itself that it was just as lovely and alluring as yellowing press clips said it was. No one in California (and few, if any, on the national scene) could match McWilliams for his rare combination of intellect and scholarship informed by an ethical vision and conveyed with impassioned eloquence. Like Tocqueville, he was capable of piercing cant and fashion to analyze the broader forces of the dream-driven culture that surrounded him. Why, for example, are Anglos driven to project an Hispanic Shangri-la onto the California they took from Mexico? Could they, he wondered, be attempting to flee from what they had made of the spoils of war? Of an elite group of Santa Barbara *caballeros* called the *rancheros visitadores*, McWilliams noted: "Ostensibly a gay affair, the annual ride represents a rather grim and desperate effort to escape the bonds of a culture that neither satisfies nor pleases. Actually there is something rather pathetic about the spectacle of these frustrated businessmen cantering forth in search of ersatz weekend romance, evoking a past that never existed to cast some glamour on an equally unreal today."²

This collection documents the astonishing array of topics tackled by McWilliams. Issues of race and class, the oppression of labor, and the structural

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 nated him. In his essay on utopian movements, he introduces us to a bi-
 zarre cast of charismatic characters and their followers, attempting to
 explain why California has provided such fertile soil for cults, and to deter-
 mine which of those movements might sprout bona fide fascism. Mc-
 Williams found such leaders as Aimee Semple McPherson and Guy W.
 Ballard to be far less dangerous than the men who occupy executive suites:
 "The real crackpots of Los Angeles in the thirties were the individuals who
 ordered tons of oranges and vegetables dumped in the bed of the Los An-
 geles River, while thousands of people were unemployed, hungry, and home-
 less."³ More potentially dangerous still, he felt, were the politicians who served
 those men and had their support: "A dapper little man with an astonishing
 capacity for petty malice, Nixon might best be described as a distinctly third-
 rate Tom Dewey. In his campaign he enjoys the support of virtually every
 newspaper in the state."⁴

He understood the indignities and violence faced daily by Asians, Mexi-
 cans, blacks, and Okies, as he did the powerful political and economic inter-
 ests which the scapegoating of those groups served. He knew how such
 animosities led to individual and collective debasement, and on to further
 violence. The bombing of Pearl Harbor and the war in the Pacific were at
 least partly the result a long history of racial provocation of which few Ameri-
 cans were aware: "Once America was committed to a policy of discrimina-
 tion based on race, national self-consciousness was stimulated throughout
 the Far East."⁵ From that point, collective violence became inevitable.

McWilliams had a keen sensitivity to the peculiarities of the California
 land and climate, to its limitations as well as its bounty and its beauty. One
 might call him a proto-environmentalist, for he knew that land—and land
value in a monopolized market economy—is essential for understanding the
 state and the ways in which it has shaped and been shaped by the myriad
 peoples who have sought to own it. Newcomers, he observed, "have never
 understood the crucial importance of water," for that would suggest a limit
 that "Southern California has always been extremely reluctant to discuss [as]
 its basic weakness."⁶ The myth of boundless abundance so necessary to lure
 more immigrants to California might well be the state's undoing, he pre-
 dicted, for there is a nearly perfect correlation between California's steady
 increase in population and the number of forest fires, floods, and other such
 "natural" disasters.

Like a psychiatrist seeking the root causes of family dysfunction, McWilliams plunged deeper into issues of land ownership in his attempt to understand and explain California's turbulent history. He knew that shortly after the Gold Rush, a very few individuals had used whatever means necessary to transfer immense tracts of the public domain to themselves and to their heirs and corporations, and that clandestine land monopoly had continued to decisively shape California. The plantation economy of the Deep South was therefore reproduced in the Far West, with the same deep division between a privileged oligarchy and its landless peasantry further complicated by racial animosity. With that division came a reign of rural and urban terror necessary to keep the powerless in their place—lynchings, beatings, night riders, enforced ignorance, and genuine concentration camps suggesting tendencies to a native fascism—that, like the shortage of water, belied the popular image of California as the happiest place on earth.

McWilliams further proposed that the ties between the South and West were political as well as cultural. In "The Long-Suffering Chinese," he brilliantly analyzed how an axis of leaders in both regions collaborated to blackmail the federal government into condoning the legal suppression of blacks in the South and Asians on the Pacific Coast. Twenty-three years later, writing for *The Nation*, he decoded the political rhetoric of a pivotal election and concluded that thinly veiled racism pervaded campaign rhetoric: "Most [Californians] won't talk about it at all if they can escape it. They don't want the nation to know—they don't want to admit to themselves—that the number-one state may elect Ronald Reagan Governor in order to 'keep the Negro in his place.'"⁷ Here was the Southern Strategy *in utero*.

It is as a public intellectual that I most admire McWilliams, for he sought not only to analyze problems but to move his readers to remedy them, and for that he needed a large audience. Unlike the hermetic academic prose of today, his writing is as clear as it is impassioned and informed, masterfully incorporating anecdote and telling quotations to engage the interest and concern of middle-class readers even in such seemingly remote subjects as the working conditions of Mexican migrant workers. The French agricultural economist Jean-Pierre Berlan wrote that he had, after discovering *Factories in the Field*, "quickly realized that there was more theoretical depth in this book than in all the doctoral dissertations of the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University of California!"⁸ For all that theoretical depth, McWilliams's eloquence made *Factories* a best-seller when it was published in 1939.

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the ties between the South and West and the Long-Suffering Chinese," he brilliantly showed both regions collaborated to blacken the legal suppression of blacks in the past. Twenty-three years later, writing in the rhetorical of a pivotal election and a heated campaign rhetoric: "Most [Californians] can escape it. They don't want the blame to themselves—that the number-one governor in order to 'keep the Negro in the cradle in utero.

It is not that I do not admire McWilliams, for he sought to help his readers to remedy them, and for his hermetic academic prose of today, and informed, masterfully incorporating and engage the interest and concern of even the most remote subjects as the working class. The French agricultural economist Jean Brunhes discovered *Factories in the Field*, and the theoretical depth in this book than in any other department of Agricultural Economics. That theoretical depth, McWilliams's work when it was published in 1939.

The depression, McWilliams wrote in his autobiography, radicalized him as it did so many others, and by the time *Factories in the Field* appeared, that group of men and women were not just documenting current events but actively shaping them. Kevin Starr describes the dense synergies in which McWilliams played such a crucial role:

[Agricultural economist] Paul Taylor went into the field at about the same time that Carey McWilliams went into the archives. Taylor, in turn, recruited Dorothea Lange as a photo-reporter. Lange's photographs, in turn, stimulated Steinbeck's investigations and helped him frame his perspective. Carey McWilliams, meanwhile, was having his perspective shaped by Steinbeck's strike novel *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and Steinbeck's reportage as well as by Lange's photographs. John Ford, in turn, obtained the black-and-white look of his film version of *The Grapes of Wrath* from the Farm Security Administration photographs taken by Lange and others. In 1940 the Public Affairs Committee of New York issued Paul Taylor's collected reports under the title *Adrift on the Land*, illustrating it with stills from John Ford's film. In *Adrift on the Land*, Taylor refers to both Steinbeck and McWilliams as parallel commentaries and partial sources. It was now time for government reports to participate in this synergy—to rise to the level of documentary art.⁹

We will never know what might have become of that progressive movement reborn with the enabling momentum given it by Roosevelt's New Deal, for like the first wave of progressivism, it was aborted by the outbreak of war and the Red Scare that followed. Nonetheless, McWilliams continued to play a vitally important role from New York as editor of *The Nation*, while his books went on to teach and to guide those who believe, as did he, that the ideal of justice and security as human birthrights was worth working toward. Among others, they inspired a Mexican field hand named César Chávez, who recalled:

Although I had been a farmworker traveling the migrant streams for many years and knew through bitter experience what prejudice and discrimination were, these books gave

me whole new insights into the forces that create wealth and poverty. They provided a link to the past and helped me to focus my determination to improve the lives of the farmworkers into strategies and tactics and a plan for action.¹⁰

An inscription on the frieze of the old state courts building in Sacramento enjoins those who enter to “bring me men to match my mountains.” Frank Du Mond painted those men in his equally inspirational—and equally facile—murals. McWilliams, by contrast, goads us to grow up. California could not, he believed, produce anything meriting the term of civilization until it acknowledged the dark complexities of its past, the injustices of its present, and the severe limitations of a future predicated on the infantile fantasy of endless growth. “California needs men who can see beyond its mountains,” he wrote, “men who can see the entire West and who realize that, as with all good things, there comes a time when the gold runs out.”¹¹ We had such a man in Carey McWilliams; he remains the mountain to match.

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June 2001

ENDNOTES

1. Du Mond’s murals were moved to San Francisco’s Main Library when the fair closed. They were removed when the Asian Art Museum gutted that building and, like so much of the Panama-Pacific International Exhibition art, are now in permanent storage.
2. “The Growth of a Legend,” p. 14 of this volume.
3. “The Politics of Utopia,” p. 61 of this volume.
4. “Bungling in California,” p. 229 of this volume.
5. *Brothers under the Skin*, by Carey McWilliams (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1946).
6. “Water! Water! Water!” p. 156 of this volume.
7. “How to Succeed With the Backlash,” p. 252 of this volume.
8. “Carey McWilliams,” by Ralph Engelman in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 137: *American Magazine Journalists, 1900–1960*, ed. Sam G. Riley. The Gale Group, 1994.
9. *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California*, by Kevin Starr (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
10. *California: The Great Exception*, ed. Carey McWilliams (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
11. *Ibid.*