

Q&A with Peter Richardson, author of *American Prophet*

American Prophet is the long-overdue biography on the brilliant life and career of a great American thinker and writer—Carey McWilliams.

McWilliams's engrossing life story reveals a figure thoroughly engaged with the issues of his time. Author Peter Richardson deftly interweaves correspondence, diary notes, published writings, and McWilliams's own and others' observations on a colorful and influential cast of characters from Hollywood, New York, Washington, D.C., and the American West. Among those making an appearance are Louis Adamic, John Fante, J. Edgar Hoover, Joseph McCarthy, H. L. Mencken (McWilliams's mentor and role model), Richard Nixon, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Studs Terkel, Hunter S. Thompson, Robert Towne, and more.

American Prophet illustrates the arc of McWilliams's life from his early literary journalism through his legal and political activism, his stint in state government, and his two decades as editor of the *Nation*. Not only will this book introduce McWilliams to a new generation of readers it will also assure his place as one of our most influential and prescient progressive political writers.

Here, Richardson offers insight on what made McWilliams great, how his legacy lives on today, and why he remains an inspiration to progressive thinkers everywhere.

1. Who was Carey McWilliams? Can you give us a brief outline of the highlights of his life and work? He was certainly an intense and prolific writer.

Yes, absolutely. Carey McWilliams is probably the most important American intellectual most people have never heard of, especially if they were born after 1960. He was a Los Angeles attorney and activist who wrote a dozen important books and hundreds of articles before moving to New York to edit *The Nation* in the 1950s.

His career had several phases. During the 1930s, McWilliams was best known for *Factories in the Field*, essentially the nonfiction version of *The Grapes of Wrath*. In the 1940s, he served in state government, wrote a book on Southern California that inspired the screenplay for "Chinatown," was an outspoken critic of the Japanese-American internment, and figured in several high-profile legal cases, including the Hollywood 10 spectacle and the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial. At *The Nation*, he muckraked relentlessly, opposed McCarthyism, Jim Crow, and Vietnam, and identified a truckload of new talent, including Ralph Nader, Howard Zinn, and Hunter S. Thompson.

In New York circles, McWilliams is now seen as a gutsy editor who was right on the big issues. In California, he's regarded as the state's preeminent public intellectual. Both characterizations are accurate, but I go a little further and argue that he's also one of the most versatile American public intellectuals of the 20th century. It's difficult to name another person who could critique modern poetry, write a Supreme Court brief, edit an

important journal of opinion, head a state agency, spearhead an effort to repeal unjust murder convictions, help defuse an urban riot, and publish a dozen consequential books.

2. Why Carey McWilliams? What was your inspiration for writing about him?

In 1999, I started working at a California think tank, and I asked some colleagues what I should read by way of background. They said everything by Carey McWilliams, whom I had never heard of, even though I'm a reasonably educated California native. His career amazed me—he seemed to be everywhere, know everyone, and churn out an enormous amount of high-quality work. When I wanted to learn more about him, I realized that no one had ever written a book about his life and work. At about that time, Kevin Starr, a true California aficionado, encouraged me to write that book. It was a big job, but also an incredibly edifying experience.

3. What is it about McWilliams that makes him not only relevant today, but worth reintroducing to a new audience, whether progressive or conservative?

First of all, McWilliams was way ahead of his time on labor issues, civil rights, the environment, immigration—you name it. A McWilliams article from 1975 on the U.S.-Mexico border could run in any magazine today, practically without change. In 1950, he described a young Richard Nixon as “a dapper little man with an astonishing capacity for petty malice,” which became painfully clear to everyone much later. His arguments about the Japanese-American internment and the Hollywood 10 were eventually adopted by the Supreme Court. So in my view, McWilliams earned the title of American prophet many times over. His work should humble some of today's pundits, whose opinions and predictions have an expiration date of about ten days.

His prose was also built to last—lucid, supple, and attentive to facts—and he had a great feeling for selection and emphasis. He took apart opposing arguments the way most people untie their shoelaces. When you read him, you rarely have the feeling that he's fighting the facts, so his conclusions seem inevitable. There are some exceptions, but his mature style is refreshingly free of jeremiad and holy zeal.

So he was a very cool cat, but his writing and advocacy earned him some powerful enemies, including J. Edgar Hoover, who considered him for detention in the event of a national emergency—even though McWilliams was heading a state agency at the time. In the book, I also discuss McWilliams's appearance before the Committee on Un-American Activities in California. Reading the transcript of his exchange with the committee chair, which has never been published or even released, was like overhearing a zoologist being interrogated by an ape. But for McWilliams, that was the other side of the prophetic tradition—the wages of dissent, you might say.

4. Is it true H.L. Mencken was McWilliams' mentor? What was it about Mencken that appealed to McWilliams?

Yes, Mencken was a huge influence on McWilliams. He got the idea for his first book, a biography of Ambrose Bierce, from Mencken, and he met one of his closest friends, novelist and screenwriter John Fante, through their mutual admiration for Mencken. McWilliams modeled his career on Mencken's, but it was only after he shrugged off his idol's anti-democratic views that he began to find his own voice. But his respect for Mencken persisted long after their political views began to diverge.

I think McWilliams was originally attracted to Mencken's irreverence, his prose style, and his willingness to challenge bourgeois orthodoxies. He also followed Mencken by focusing almost exclusively on the American scene. Later on, he adopted Mencken's editorial practices—quick responses, light editing, and a real openness to new voices and talents.

5. Are there parallels to some of the issues McWilliams devoted himself to and what is going on right now in our own government?

Yes, very strong parallels. McWilliams would have a lot to say today about race and ethnicity, Latino politics, immigration and border security, growing income inequality, and living conditions among the poor. I think he would also have plenty to say about the PATRIOT act, the Supreme Court, the religious right, crony capitalism, militarism, and the blind faith many people seem to have in market forces. Most of McWilliams's best stuff was on domestic politics, but I think he would have a field day on Iraq War, too.

6. What are some of McWilliams' greatest legacies in terms of ideas or theories? Is the McWilliams influence still being felt?

McWilliams aficionados in New York would say, correctly, that his legacy at *The Nation* is very significant, but I think his reputation now is mostly based on his books, almost all of which he published while living in Los Angeles. Their influence still registers in Chicano studies, urban planning, and labor studies, for example, but his general approach to California and its history, especially his "exceptionalist" account of the state and its development, has probably left the deepest impression.

The list of individual writers and scholars he influenced is long. Patricia Nelson Limerick, a leading historian of the American West, has acknowledged his influence on her work. He's also an indispensable source for California writers like Kevin Starr, Mike Davis, and Lou Cannon. During the 1990s, McWilliams's critical fortunes began to improve after Starr, Limerick, and Davis pointed out his achievements.

He also influenced a generation of activists, including Cesar Chavez, and California artists. I've found that the fastest way to get McWilliams onto someone's cultural radar is to note that his work inspired Robert Towne's "Chinatown." Luis Valdez's "Zoot Suit" also owes something to McWilliams's advocacy and reporting in the 1940s.

Most writers that mention McWilliams now fall into one of two categories. One group admires him more or less reflexively. A lot of journalists fall into this "retro reverence"

category. Another group, mostly academics, works very hard to misread and then dismiss his arguments, usually to clear the stage for their own. But in the end, their claims look suspiciously like his, but with more jargon. This is what the literary critic Harold Bloom called the anxiety of influence: that dreadful feeling that a dead man's voice is outrageously more alive than your own.

7. McWilliams was editor of *The Nation* for over twenty years. What was his greatest influence there? How did he change or affect what the magazine had to say?

Probably his chief contribution there was to make *The Nation* a forum for investigative journalism as well as a journal of opinion. In the 1950s, *The Nation* was keeping the muckraking tradition alive almost single-handedly. McWilliams also shepherded the magazine through the McCarthy period, when it came under withering attack from neoconservatives and anti-Communist liberals like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. Several of his friends committed suicide during that time, but McWilliams showed a lot of cool resolve. As Studs Terkel said later, you had to credit McWilliams for his guts as well as his prescience.

During the 1960s, younger leftists were less likely to consult *The Nation* for political ideas, and McWilliams had misgivings about their more flamboyant forms of protest. Also, other news organizations with greater resources began to do more investigative reporting, leaving fewer stories for *The Nation* to break. But McWilliams maintained his reputation for being right on the big issues; he was an early critic of the Vietnam War, for example, and he kept the pressure on President Nixon about Vietnam and Watergate.

8. McWilliams loved California. What was it about that state that he found particularly inspiring or worth writing about?

As a young man, McWilliams hated Los Angeles. For him, it was a shapeless blob, "hopelessly vulgar," promoted relentlessly by a class of swindling boosters. All true, of course, but in the end, Southern California worked its charms on him. He admired its energy, its freewheeling quality, its diversity, and its ability to reinvent itself. He later attributed those qualities to the state as a whole and traced most of them to a Gold Rush mentality.

Another thing he appreciated about California was its position on the Pacific Rim. He recognized the enormous importance of that single physical fact and its implications for world trade. He was a big believer in "the authority of the land," and he understood the full value of natural resources, especially water. He was a kind of proto-environmentalist in that way.

9. What are some of the ways California has changed that McWilliams would find either provoking or worth writing about today?

I think he would see the Schwarzenegger phenomenon as fresh evidence of good old California exceptionalism. The electricity crisis a few years back would have confirmed his suspicions of market forces run amok. And he would find ample evidence for his prediction that Latinos would reclaim California without firing a shot.