

CAREY MCWILLIAMS, FACTORIES IN THE FIELD, AND HENRY GEORGE

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(The following presentation was made at the Council of Georgist Organizations in Newport Beach, CA on July 10, 2014. Susan McWilliams is an Associate Professor in the Department of Politics at Pomona College. Carey McWilliams is her grandfather.)

Thank you to Mason Gaffney, who invited me to speak about my grandfather, Carey McWilliams. I am grateful to my grandfather for pointing me, in his work, back to the work of Henry George. And I am gratified to be able today to turn those tables – to point you, you lovers of Henry George, back to the work of Carey McWilliams.

Yesterday, the cover story of The Los Angeles Times detailed the daily catastrophe that is taking place on the rivers and roads south of this country, as untold numbers of foreigners – almost all of them Central American and some of them unaccompanied children – endure inhumane conditions and take excruciating risks to cross the border into the southwestern United States, usually in the hope of finding some tenuous toehold in the American workforce.

Yesterday, too, the lead editorial in The New York Times addressed the colossal drought that is overcoming this state, noting that California's agricultural sector is the largest in the country and accounts for about 80 percent of the state's water use.

But yesterday, it wasn't just The Los Angeles Times and The New York Times where these particular news stories were featured. If you had looked yesterday on the front pages of CNN.com, FoxNews.com, The Huffington Post, Google News, and pretty much any other news source, you would have found coverage of one if not both of these stories, delivered with a breathless and urgent intensity.

In other words, yesterday was another one of those days – and there are many of them – when I found myself thinking: What is new about this “news”? If anyone thinks that immigration from Central America to the southwestern United States is a new phenomenon, let him consult the work of my grandfather, Carey

McWilliams, who eighty years ago was writing about that very same thing. If anyone thinks that migratory labor is a new phenomenon, let him consult the work of my grandfather, Carey McWilliams, whose 1939 book, *Factories in the Field*, was the nonfictional counterpart to John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, and was the first major exposé of American corporate agriculture. They could also consult his books *Ill Fares the Land or North from Mexico*, each of which added to his accounting of and insights into the relationships between immigration and corporate control of agriculture in the southwest. And if anyone thinks that drought and its connection to California agriculture is a new phenomenon, let him consult the work of my grandfather, Carey McWilliams, whose reflections on the California Water Wars in his book *Southern California Country* inspired Robert Towne to write the screenplay for *Chinatown*.

My grandfather, who was born in 1905 and died in 1980, was ahead of his time and on the right side of pretty much every issue. He was a moral titan. Just to mention a few other of his accomplishments: 1) He was the muckraking editor of *The Nation* magazine for twenty years, during which time he was the first journalist to report that the United States was training guerillas in preparation for the Bay of Pigs invasion; 2) he wrote a series of articles and books starting in the 1930s about racism and anti-Semitism in America, one of which, *Prejudice*, was such a powerful statement about anti-Japanese sentiment that it was cited multiple times by Justice Frank Murphy's dissent in *Korematsu v. the United States*; 3) he was an energetic opponent of McCarthyism, who himself was interrogated by the Committee on Un-American Activities in California (which some of you may know as the “Tenney Committee”) and who penned an amicus brief for the Hollywood Ten's Supreme Court appeal; 4) he published work on California (such as the books *California: The Great Exception* and *Southern California: An Island on the Land*, both of which are still in print) and is regarded, at least by California State Librarian Emeritus Kevin Starr, as the finest nonfiction writing on California that has ever been penned; and 5) as an editor, he launched the careers of a number of young writers, including Howard Zinn, Ralph Nader, and Hunter S. Thompson (the last of whom he exhorted to travel to California to investigate the strange growth of motorcycle gangs, an exhortation that led Thompson to do the work that became the book *Hells Angels*). And that's telling you only part of his story, giving you only a few of his accomplishments.

(Well, one more piece of the story: I pretty much have to mention that a younger Mason Gaffney had the bad judgment, when he was applying to graduate school, to solicit a letter of recommendation from my grandfather, who had published some of his work in *The Nation*. For this, a number of professors in the economics department at Berkeley tried to get Mason thrown out of grad school; it was the McCarthy era, and associating with my grandfather rendered Mason a suspicious character.)

In any case, if we can look at the news today and look back at my grandfather's work and know him to be, as his biographer Peter Richardson calls him, an American Prophet, it's important for this (continued on page 6)

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crowd to know that my grandfather, in his turn, saw Henry George in a similarly laudatory vein.

If I say to you today, "anyone who thinks these problems are new problems should read their Carey McWilliams," eighty years ago, my grandfather was writing, "anyone who thinks these problems are new problems should read their Henry George."

In his writing, my grandfather calls Henry George "remarkably shrewd," a man whose reform agitation was "brilliantly conducted." He calls him "that most remarkable Californian" – which for my grandfather, a connoisseur of all things Californian, were serious words.

(It may also be worth mentioning that my grandfather may be one of the few Americans who ever used the word "conservative" to apply to the ideas of Henry George. My grandfather did this in *Factories in the Fields*, making the following reflection. Quote: "In 1871, Henry George referred to the Mexican land grants in California as 'a history of greed, of perjury, of corruption, of spoliation and high-handed robbery for which it will be difficult to find a parallel.' The statement is conservative.")

This gives you a general sense of the affinity between Henry George and Carey McWilliams, but let me give you a lengthier example of how my grandfather's work draws on George's: Early on in *Factories in the Field*, that damning exposé of American corporate agriculture, my grandfather writes this, "If anyone thinks the problem of migratory farm labor in California is a new problem, let him consult Henry George. Migratory labor, it has been said, is a result of the character of California agriculture, but the character of California agriculture is, in turn, a consequence of the type of land ownership in California."

He goes on to quote George at length, noting that the farm laborers of California that George wrote about in 1871 were "the progenitors of the hordes of migratory workers" traveling the West in the late 1930s (who are themselves, of course, the progenitors of the millions of migrant laborers who are scattered around this country today). "Listen to George," he writes. If you want to make sense of "the complacent acceptance of this army of workers, [which] has always been of army proportions" – my grandfather insists that you had to see what Henry George saw: that early on, a theory evolved in California and elsewhere to rationalize the existence of these countless tramps – that these migratory laborers were "tramps" who "actually preferred 'the open road' and the jolly scorchingly hot valleys, and the drizzle and cold of early fall rains. There was nothing you could do with these insouciant and light-hearted boys: you couldn't even pay them a decent wage for they would 'drink it up right away.' As for providing them with shelter or a bed – why, they loved the open air and would rather die than take a bath." That imagination of a hearty and joyful "tramping life" justified the exploitation of tens of thousands vulnerable people.

That grounding of complacency, of course, is not obsolescent today. I hear it in the idea that immigrants – especially undocumented immigrants – are happy to do the crappiest work for the crappiest pay while living in the crappiest conditions. I hear it in the idea that temporary laborers really enjoy the quote-unquote "freedom" that comes with short-term jobs – (that, as one author in *Forbes* magazine put it two years ago, temporary labor "lets you get psyched about a work project – without the pressure of long-term job expectations." And hey, she adds, "No job is forever, anyway," making the acceptance of temp jobs, quote, "tremendously freeing.")

My grandfather, in this and his other attempts to show how Henry George's insights remained relevant in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, also helps to show how George's insights remain relevant in the present day.

I think that in some measure, my grandfather identified with Henry George. They were both somewhat searching (slightly wayward) young men who came to California in their late teens – George was about 18 when he arrived in San Francisco, and my grandfather came to Los Angeles at 17 – who had spent time working on farms and then took newspaper jobs to make ends meet. For both men, working at newspapers gave them what my grandfather called "a ringside seat at the circus" of California life. My grandfather would argue that this – having California in common – was pretty much everything.

In his book *California: The Great Exception*, my grandfather praises George's great book, *Progress and Poverty* but then remarks that it is a "strange kind of book to emerge from a [so-called] 'frontier' community." He then wonders: "What was there about the social atmosphere of California that prompted George to write this remarkable book?"

To answer that question, my grandfather quotes George: "If I have been able to emancipate myself from ideas which have fettered far abler men," he said, "it is doubtless due to the fact that my study of social problems was in a country like California, where they have been presented with a peculiar directness."

In California, my grandfather reflects, "George actually witnessed a process of land monopolization which, in one generation, brought about changes that elsewhere had been spaced over centuries. It is reasonable to infer, therefore, that the rapidity with which this process took place produced a sense of shock, of amazement, which greatly stimulated George's curiosity. Above all, it was the appearance of poverty in the midst of progress that challenged the mind of Henry George."

"George thought about the origin of things, 'as if he were the first man who ever thought,'" my grandfather wrote, "because he was actually an eyewitness to the origin of poverty. It was the 'dramatic repetition' of the process of land monopolization in California that so forcefully impressed Henry George. In California he (continued on page 7)

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actually saw an economic process 'visibly hardening to the static, with a swiftness dramatic enough to impress upon him the significance of a story that had been obscured in earlier telling by the slowness of the denouement.' Since the process unfolded in California with such dramatic swiftness, it naturally followed that the remedy which George proposed should have been both drastic and novel.... The circumstances encouraged originality just as the facts demanded explanation."

In those moments, I think that when my grandfather writes about the life and thought of Henry George, he is also writing about the life of Carey McWilliams. You could ask about my grandfather, the way that my grandfather asks about Henry George, what it was about California that made his thought so powerful, so original, so forceful and so radical?

Just as Henry George confronted a California in the 1870s in which land monopolization was dramatic and unavoidable, Carey McWilliams confronted a California in the 1920s and '30s in which "a new type of agriculture" had been created: agriculture which was "large-scale, intensive, diversified, mechanized." This agriculture, too, was dramatic, unavoidable, and unparalleled. Unlike most other places in the United States, California never really had any history of small-scale agriculture or family farming; here, agriculture was industrialized from the get-go.

My grandfather called them "farm factories." (I'm pretty sure, for the record, that Factories in the Field is the origin of the term "factory farming" that is so widespread today.) In California, my grandfather wrote, "The mechanism of fascist control has been carried to further lengths than elsewhere in America," to the point in which "rulers are treating workers as beasts of the fields." He argued that "before these workers can achieve a solution to the problems facing them, they will have to work a revolution in California land ownership" – a revolution, as the scholar Michael Steiner has put it, "requiring the collectivization of corporate agriculture."

Like Henry George, my grandfather was a man whose ideas were beyond and outside his time. Also like Henry George, my grandfather was a man who "thought about the origin of things, 'as if he were the first man who ever thought,'" because – just as George was actually an eyewitness to the origin of poverty, my grandfather was actually an eyewitness to the origins of industrialized agriculture. And like Henry George, my grandfather had to come up with novel, powerful, and borderline utopian responses to what he witnessed, because what he was witnessing was itself novel, powerful, and borderline utopian in its own right.

In contemplating all this, I find myself thinking about how the word "radical" – a word applied often enough to Henry George, and a word my grandfather gleefully applied to himself – comes from the late Latin *radicalis*, meaning "of or having roots" – and meaning "going to the origin." My grandfather and Henry George both were intent on getting to the root of things.

Let me switch gears for a minute and tell you a bit about how my grandfather ended up as a new person with new eyes on that new California landscape. The young Carey grew up in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, the son of a self-made cattle rancher and Democratic state senator named Jerry McWilliams.

Growing up on the cattle ranch had a longtime influence on my grandfather. First, as my father once wrote, "the rhythm of cattle ranching on northwest Colorado was shaped by the land and the seasons... Nature was fundamental and the land a presence." As a result, my grandfather "learned to see the land as an inescapable counterweight to human designs." Growing up there "helped instill in him the lesson of the 'authority of the land'" and to gain an understanding of how nature, and the land, endures and transcends all human endeavors. The ultimate truth of things is that we do not own land or nature; nature owns us.

By all accounts, my grandfathers' was a privileged, and beautiful, childhood. His father Jerry McWilliams was one of the most prominent people in Steamboat Springs if not in Colorado, and Jerry's position as state senator meant that part of the year, the family moved from the ranch in Steamboat to live in the Brown Palace Hotel in Denver (a place that still stands as the epitome of luxury. But that life of luxury came crashing down all at once. When my grandfather was just starting high school, Jerry – and the family – lost everything. As World War I ended, the United States lifted its embargo on Argentine beef and flattened the cattle business. Jerry was left with virtually nothing. The economic collapse was totalizing, leading Jerry himself to collapse on the floor of the Colorado State Senate. He died shortly thereafter – members of my family suspect he committed suicide – in a Colorado mental hospital.

For my 14-year-old grandfather, going from riches to rags like this changed everything. As my father used to say, faced with this total collapse of his family, my grandfather had a kind of choice: He could blame his father or "the system." He chose to blame the system, and for the rest of his life, he never trusted free enterprise. For him, as his biographer Peter Richardson has written, "markets weren't mechanisms for producing wealth and creating choices; instead, they were wild, irrational forces that tore men's souls to pieces," that took choices away from you. The marketization and commoditization, particularly of nature and the land, deprived human beings of security, dignity, and even independence.

In addition, his family's sudden collapse gave my grandfather a visceral knowledge of human equality. Moving almost overnight from high society to the fringes of the lower middle class showed my grandfather both the truth that all social position is a matter of convention, subject to instantaneous shifts of fortune and fashion and fad.

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something of a rebel.

My grandfather goes on to say that “the forces that prompted George to make his inquiry into the origin of poverty have continued to operate in California. The paradox of progress and poverty is almost as striking in the California of today as in the California of 1879.”

I think it’s hard not to come to the conclusion that the paradox of progress and poverty might be more striking now, in the California of the early twenty-first century, as it was in the California of 1879.

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