

OLLI syllabus
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American Prophet: The Life and Times of Carey McWilliams

Course Description

California historian Kevin Starr called Carey McWilliams “the state’s most astute political observer” and “the single finest nonfiction-writer on California—ever.” Radical author Mike Davis called McWilliams “the California left’s one-man think tank.” His other admirers included Cesar Chavez, Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, and western historian Patricia Nelson Limerick. His work inspired Robert Towne’s original screenplay for *Chinatown* and Luis Valdez’s *Zoot Suit*.

Yet for all these accolades, McWilliams remains unknown to the vast majority of readers in California and the United States. What gives?

In this class, we’ll survey McWilliams’s life and work, including his journalism, legal activism, books, and two decades as editor of *The Nation* magazine. Although he’s clearly a major California writer, I’ll argue that he was also one of the most versatile, productive, and consequential American public intellectuals of the twentieth century.

Syllabus

Jan. 27: After a quick overview of McWilliams’s life and work, we’ll consider his upbringing in Colorado, his move to Los Angeles as a teenager, his work as an attorney, and his earliest literary ambitions. In the second hour, we’ll look at his radicalization during the Great Depression as well as *Factories in the Field* (1939), his history of California farm labor.

Feb. 3: The 1940s were a busy time for McWilliams. On the strength of his farm labor book, he was appointed to a position in state government. He also played important roles in the Zoot Suit Riots, the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, the Japanese internment, and the Hollywood 10. In the face of stiff resistance from his enemies, he wrote almost one first-rate book per year on California history, racial and ethnic prejudice, and other topics. We will spend the first and second hours on his remarkable output during the 40s.

Feb. 10: As the McCarthy Era was heating up, McWilliams became the editor of *The Nation* magazine. He remained for two decades and sponsored an impressive body of work there. He also resisted McCarthyism, Jim Crow, and the Vietnam War and was especially eloquent on the subjects of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. We will spend the first hour on his work at *The Nation*, then turn to his extraordinary influence and legacy. We will end with a brief discussion about why McWilliams receives relatively little attention today.

Recommended Readings

Peter Richardson, *American Prophet: The Life and Work of Carey McWilliams* (University of California Press, 2019). Shorter pieces by and about McWilliams are also available online.