INTRODUCTION

Metropolis in the Making

Los Angeles in the 1920s

Jules Tygiel

Carey McWilliams, the patron saint of Los Angeles history, first arrived in the City of Angels at the dawn of the great boom of the 1920s. He had departed his native Colorado in the midst of a snowstorm, but stepped off his train, not unlike Dorothy landing in Oz, into a land of bright colors, flowers, and perpetual sunshine. "The extraordinary green of the lawns and hillsides" dazzled McWilliams. But, he perceived, "it was the kind of green that seemed as though it might rub off on your hands; a theatrical green, a green that was not quite real." Like most migrants to Los Angeles, McWilliams was unprepared for the scenes that he witnessed. In the teeming downtown district, he observed unsettling crowds, the "aimless restless movement of armies of people with nothing much to do who were not going anyplace in particular."[1] McWilliams also discovered a "vicious economic underworld" of "two bit predators out to con the ignorant and fleece the innocent." On the outskirts of the city, he saw prosperous orchards, citrus groves, and produce fields making way for "unplanned and often jerry-built subdivisions."[2]

McWilliams developed an instant loathing for this "strange new city that was changing every hour." He "quickly got the feeling that, sociologically speaking, Los Angeles was a very strange community," a mushroom civilization in which "the surface was bright and pleasing, but the nether side was often dark and ugly."[3] Los Angeles, he complained, "lacked form and identity; there was no center." Gradually, however, the seemingly perverse charm of the region began to grow on McWilliams. "For an informal but revealing 'education' in the ways of laissez-faire capitalism, I had come to the right place at precisely the right time," he concluded. "Here the American people were erupting, like lava from a volcano; here was the place for me—a ringside seat at the circus." Los Angeles, McWilliams came to believe, would

become America's "great city of the Pacific, the most fantastic city in the world."[4]

Indeed, Los Angeles assumed much of its modern form in the 1920s. Not only did the city's population more than double, from 577,000 to 1.24 million, but much of what we would now recognize as Los Angeles—the vast sprawl, its reliance on the automobile, its predominance as a western business and financial center, the allure of Hollywood—took shape during the twenties. In 1919 Los Angeles had been physically smaller, anchored by a downtown and central district that housed more than half the population, the vast majority of whom came from white Anglo-Saxon Protestant stock. The Big Red Cars of Pacific Electric, the nation's largest electric streetcar system, connected the downtown and its hinterland. Most of the surrounding communities were unincorporated and sparsely developed. The hills remained barren of settlement. The city presented, according to McWilliams, "the curious spectacle of a large metropolitan area without an industrial base."[5] Los Angeles ranked behind seventeen other cities as a manufacturing center, its labor force disproportionately concentrated in service and tourist-based enterprises. The region remained a relatively minor player in the nation's petroleum industry, and Goodyear Tire had just become the first significant national company to open a branch plant in the area. The city's most famous industry, motion pictures, on the other hand, had already established itself in Hollywood, producing over 80 percent of the world's movies. Seventy independent companies turned out a multitude of silent movies featuring diverse themes and a variety of political agendas.

By 1929, however, on the eve of the Great Depression, Los Angeles had experienced a dramatic transformation. A combination of rapid in-migration and aggressive expansion had added 80 square miles and almost 600,000 residents to create a new metropolis. During the 1920s Los Angeles annexed 45 adjacent communities, spreading out northward into the San Fernando Valley and southward toward the harbor at San Pedro. By the end of the decade less than a third of the population lived in the downtown, East Los Angeles, Hollywood, and Wilshire districts,[6] with residents increasingly relying on the automobile, rather than the Big Red Cars for transportation. Real estate developments like Bel-Air and Hollywoodland began to open up the hillsides to settlement. The population remained overwhelmingly Caucasian and Protestant, but the decade had also witnessed the beginnings of two "great migrations": of Mexicans uprooted by the Mexican Revolution and of African Americans leaving the South. Combined with a growing Japanese population, they gave Los Angeles the second-highest percentage of nonwhites of any major city in the nation (after Baltimore). Substantial communities of Jews, Slavs, Italians, Russians, and Armenians had also taken shape.

The most striking change had occurred in the industrial realm. Spectac-

ular oil discoveries just south of the city in Huntington Beach, Long Beach, and Santa Fe Springs had made the Los Angeles basin into one of the world's great petroleum-producing areas. The development of a rapidly growing Central Manufacturing District had attracted myriad corporations to locate branch plants in the region, generating a veritable industrial revolution. By 1930, Los Angeles ranked not only first in the nation in movie production, but second in the making of automobile tires, and it was rapidly rising in a host of other areas. The city had emerged as the aviation capital of the United States, with a third of the nation's air traffic centered in the region. More than a quarter of its workers were now engaged in manufacturing, and the city had leaped to ninth place among the nation's industrial centers. Large corporate employers had increasingly replaced smaller enterprises as the dominant economic players. In Hollywood, for example, the Big Eight companies now produced 90 percent of all major movies, controlling not just the making of films but, through ownership of theater chains, their distribution and exhibition as well.

"The history of Los Angeles," McWilliams would write, "is the history of its booms." Indeed, he commented, from 1870 on there had been "one continuous boom, punctuated at intervals by major explosions." Even within this context, however, the boom of the 1920s stood out to McWilliams as a "truly bonanza affair . . . one long drunken orgy, one protracted debauch," that would undermine the community's social structure, "warping and twisting its institutions."[7] *Saturday Evening Post* correspondent Albert Atwood commented in 1923 on the "extraordinary and almost unprecedented pouring of population, money and prosperity into one section of the country and more particularly into one city," and the "insistent element of speculation [that] permeates all walks of life."[8] Local journalist Guy Finney described a city "particularly ripe for heedless financial adventure."[9] This runaway growth occurred against a backdrop of constant spectacle: the foibles and scandals of affluent Hollywood, the oil stock promotion schemes of colorful confidence artists like C. C. Julian, and the boisterous religious revivalism of Aimee Semple McPherson.

In 1946, McWilliams recorded his impressions of his adopted homeland in his engaging classic, *Southern California: An Island on the Land.* In it he disavowed "the well worn path of most books about Southern California," and attempted instead to unearth what he called "the region's cultural landscape."[10] Several themes underscored his interpretation. To McWilliams Southern California was a paradoxical region, both in its physical realities ("a desert that faces an ocean") and in a political and cultural sense. "Almost every aspect of life in Southern California possessed a delightful novelty," he wrote. "Sociologically detached from the rest of the country," the section existed "as a kind of sovereign empire by the western shore."[11] Furthermore, "Southern California is man-made, a gigantic improvisation,"

into which "virtually everything has been imported . . . an artificial region, a product of forced growth and rapid change." Los Angeles itself was a "city based on improvisation, words, propaganda, boosterism," a "series of connecting villages . . . lacking traditional, ties, associations, and restraints."[12] Perhaps most significantly, McWilliams attributed the area's eccentricities not to its "fabled climate," but to its incessant growth. The "volume and velocity of migration" had created a "sociology of the boom," that had reshaped the contours of the American dream in Southern California and Los Angeles.[13]

Borrowing heavily from 1920s magazine journalists like Sarah Comstock, McWilliams portrayed Los Angeles as "the melting pot for the peoples of the United States."[14] Although he acknowledged the presence of other racial and ethnic groups, the overwhelming predominance of white migrants from the Midwest attracted most of his attention. Anticipating historians like James Gregory[15] by almost half a century, McWilliams treated these new arrivals from the heartland not as simply transplanted citizens, but as immigrants in their own right, undergoing a "process of cultural adaptation." To combat the loneliness created by migration, they patronized cafeterias and formed state societies where they might meet people from home. Like European transplants, they developed an "alien patrimony," an identification with their home states, which they romanticized with qualities they could not find in their strange new surroundings.[16]

The never-ending influx of new arrivals, according to McWilliams, determined virtually every aspect of life in California, from its "confused arboreal pattern" to its religious eccentricities and its "curious lack of social continuity." The boom cycle had given Los Angeles its "sprawling centrifugal form," and made it "a city without a center . . . a collection of suburbs in search of a city." Migration had made Los Angeles a haven for evangelical sects, cults, and "freak religions" and rendered it a "vast drama of maladjustment," with soaring rates of divorce, suicide, and addiction. Repeated "avalanches of population" had "corrupted the civic virtue of the body politic" and disrupted political reform movements. The succession of booms had encouraged "a rather easy code of commercial ethics" and a toleration of business practices that "would be abhorrent in a more stable community." Even Hollywood benefited from "the kind of community where a circus industry could take root . . . a frontier town forever booming; a community kept currently typical-American by constant migration."[17]

As a result, Southern Californians suffered from what McWilliams called a "slight case of cultural confusion."[18] Long before the pioneering writings of historian Herbert Gutman in the 1970s,[19] McWilliams, recognized that a continuous influx of newcomers meant that each wave of migrants would be "compelled to discover the region afresh." Migrants repeatedly "came bearing a load of previously acquired notions, customs, practices, and concepts

which they stubbornly insisted could be applied in Southern California." They engaged in a massive environmental facelift, decimating the native live oaks and burning the indigenous chaparral, introducing flowers, trees, and shrubs from "the far corners of the earth." They introduced modes of architecture more characteristic of eastern climes. The unplanned mixing of regional styles gave Southern California an "unreal appearance," but it also made the region a "great laboratory of experimentation," and a proving ground for imported ideas, practices, and customs.[20]

Southern California: An Island on the Land became to generations of Los Angeles historians what W. J. Cash's *Mind of the South* was to scholars of the American South—a seminal work that inspired others to examine the region and sharply influenced their ultimate interpretations.[21] McWilliams's lively writing and provocative insights, however, obscured the book's shortcomings. At times, as in his overwrought retelling of the Owens Valley "tragedy," McWilliams substituted local folklore for sound history. He also exaggerated the uniqueness of Los Angeles. His assumptions about other American cities were based more on speculation than research, and he underestimated the unsettled nature of other urban areas. The work of Stephan Thernstrom and others would demonstrate the common volatility of cities in the United States and render the Los Angeles experience less exceptional than McWilliams indicated.[22] In addition, McWilliams overstated the isolation of Los Angeles from national influences. He argued that political developments elsewhere had "virtually no repercussions here," and that the region was "sociologically detached from the rest of the country."[23] But Los Angeles largely followed the patterns of national politics—Progressive reform, reaction in the 1920s, and a swing to the New Deal in the 1930s—and responded to the effects of national economic swings. Much of the sense of excitement and recklessness in the 1920s came not only from the local boom, but from the greater accessibility of spectacle created nationally by the advent of radio, newsreels, and tabloid newspapers and the speculative frenzy that gripped the nation as a whole. Los Angeles might arguably have sailed toward the extreme ends of the spectrum at various moments in its history, but it rarely, if ever, drifted entirely out of the American mainstream.

More surprising, given McWilliams's leftist politics, is the mildness of his critique of the Los Angeles political and economic establishments. McWilliams, to be sure, ardently exposes the repressive nature of the city's antiunion, open shop, and antiradical crusades. The *Los Angeles Times,* the Merchants and Manufacturers Association, and other allies, in their ardor to make Los Angeles the "white spot" of the nation, ruled Southern California with "an iron hand," charges McWilliams. The Better America Federation and like-minded groups employed a "host of spies, stool pigeons and informers to disrupt trade unions, to provoke violence, and to ferret out the

reds." The Red Squad of the Los Angeles Police Department "made a mockery of the right of free speech," creating a "background of terrorism and police brutality."[24]

But beyond his revealing commentary on Los Angeles business leaders as boosters, McWilliams delves little into the nonlabor activities of the city's economic elites. Harry Chandler, the powerful publisher of the *Times,* godfather to a myriad of Los Angeles business ventures, and in popular mythology the éminence grise of the city's economic successes and excesses, makes but a few token appearances. Influential bankers like Henry M. Robinson and Joseph F. Sartori merit a single mention. Nor does McWilliams comment on the planning initiatives underwriting the creation of the innovative Central Manufacturing District and other industrial districts. Local political elections and issues never enter McWilliams's narrative.

Southern California, however, remains a formidable achievement. More than half a century after its publication, it still dominates the historiographical landscape as a starting point for most research on Los Angeles. In part this is true because of the relative dearth of other studies until recent years. The city's history became the grist for scores of mystery novels and motion pictures. However, with the exception of *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850–1930* by Robert Fogelson, *Thinking Big: The Story of the Los Angeles Times, Its Publishers and Their Influence on Southern California* by Robert Gottlieb and Irene Wolt, and books about the movie industry or the quest for water, few book-length scholarly explorations of the city's history surfaced before 1990.[25] In that year, two significant new volumes—Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* and Kevin Starr's *Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s*—appeared.[26] Their publication indicated a shifting of the tide. A new generation of scholars turned their attention to the history of Los Angeles and began to create a richer, more detailed analytical tableau of the city's past.[27]

The essays in this volume present some of the best of this work. In some instances they reinforce McWilliams's interpretations, in others they critique his conclusions, and often they delve into areas that he barely touched upon. McWilliams portrayed Los Angeles as a largely unplanned product, cobbled together by the whims of new arrivals and the excesses of mindless boosterism. Greg Hise and Mike Davis, on the other hand, show how elites, entrepreneurs, and planners consciously guided the manufacturing growth in the region, according to Hise, fixing "the coordinates for an industrial Los Angeles that has structured the pattern of city building and urban life from that time forward." Matthew W. Roth unveils the role of city engineers, emboldened by the success of the Owens Valley water project, in the construction of Mulholland Highway.

Even more than McWilliams, the current authors stress the extraordinary variety of the Los Angeles experience. As Michael E. Engh comments

in his article "Practically Every Religion Being Represented," Angelenos in the 1920s became "pioneers of religious diversity in the United States" in this century, seeking to "articulate a new model beyond that of the melting pot" to accommodate a society more multicultural than that in other American cities. While McWilliams stressed the more flamboyant religious leaders like Aimee Semple McPherson, Philip Goff looks at the career of fundamentalist minister Charles E. Fuller of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. Fuller, more measured and understated than McPherson, became "the most popular radio preacher in history" and laid the foundation for the fundamentalist resurgence of the late twentieth century. William Deverell resurrects the alternative religious career of Garfield Bromley Oxnam, preacher of the Social Gospel, who ran afoul of the city's conservative watchdogs when he entered the political arena in 1923.

Like McWilliams, many of these articles address the process of resettlement and redefinition, but the drama here is more often one of healthy adaptation rather than social maladjustment. Douglas Monroy describes the efforts of Mexican immigrants to create a *México de afuera,* or "Mexico away," in their new homeland, re-creating a more familiar landscape through theater, sports, and religion. Douglas Flamming captures the African American community struggling to achieve not just a local, but a national identity, culminating in the establishment of one of the country's most active branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the successful staging of the 1928 NAACP convention. David Charles Sloane, in a revealing essay on Forest Lawn, shows how Hubert Eaton, recognizing the needs of a transplanted populace, "reinvented the cemetery as a memorial park . . . a place of life, not death," an eternal resting place more in keeping with the values of twentieth-century consumer society.

Throughout the Los Angeles basin, new arrivals, even those with modest means, became home owners and established substantive communities. Becky Nicolaides depicts families like the Smiths of South Gate who acquired a patch of land, built their own home, and, through a combination of industrial employment and subsistence farming, "devised a pre-modern solution to the problems posed by industrial capitalism." Even amid the burgeoning oilfields, as Nancy Qwam-Wickham demonstrates, workers formed communities of single-family homes and maintained an anti-urban ethos, at the very time they were becoming engulfed by the oil rigs and refineries of the expanding metropolis. Throughout the working-class suburbs, laborers took advantage of Pacific Ready Cut Bungalow kits and low property prices to acquire a foothold, and as Nicolaides argues, turn "their residential environment into a source of economic security."

For many, however, as Mike Davis notes, the need to meet house payments and to maintain these homes bred fear and uncertainty, particularly

in the harsh anti-union, low-wage environment. The Los Angeles of these essays remains an often grim, repressive universe. The creation of the Central Manufacturing District in Vernon, according to Davis, offered businessmen "a scientifically planned, intensified industrial district," a community devoid of residences and occupied almost exclusively by factories, where entrepreneurs could be free of political opposition from workers and labor unions. Clark Davis portrays "legions of white-collar employees working in crowded downtown offices," receiving blue-collar-level wages. Beneath the glitter of Hollywood, Laurie Pintar discovers a world of low pay and poor working conditions.

The oppressive politics of the open shop reinforced this reality. "Militant anti-unionism, together with scientific factory planning, low taxes, abundant electric power, warm weather, mass-produced bungalows, and a racially selected labor force made Los Angeles a paradise of the open shop," writes Mike Davis. Pintar describes how movie moguls crushed the strikes of studio unions. Steven Ross argues that the rise of the studio system and theater chains allowed the conservative leaders of the industry to purge mentions of class conflict, labor unions, and radicalism, all staples of independent moviemaking in the 1910s, from the mass market feature films of the 1920s. Deverell reveals the "powerful shrill voice of reaction," represented by conservative groups like the Better America Federation, which stridently combated not only labor unions and radical activists, but liberal Progressive political and school reforms.

Los Angeles was also a land of harsh discrimination. The Ku Klux Klan found a ready following in 1920s Southern California. Employers in many industries, especially the expanding white-collar sector, as Clark Davis illustrates, sought to hire only "red-blooded Americans." According to Hise, the "imaginative geographies" envisioned by local leaders and planners stressed whites-only policies, and zoning in towns like Torrance specifically barred non-Caucasians. Restrictive housing covenants in most sections of the region prevented nonwhites from moving in. The Legal Committee of the NAACP, writes Flamming, found ample work warding off police brutality against minorities and segregation in housing and public swimming pools. Exclusion persisted even in death. At Forest Lawn, notes Sloane, "only people of Caucasian descent were welcome to purchase lots."

McWilliams ignored local politics, but Deverell and Tom Sitton flesh out the dynamics of electoral contests in the city. Sitton explores the limitations of the economic oligarchy and alleged political boss Kent Parrot in enforcing their respective agendas on local voters. Sitton contends that the entrepreneurial elite was "not as dominant in municipal politics as its contemporary opponents and some later observers have claimed." Rival forces consistently and often successfully challenged its hegemony. Alternatively, Deverell demonstrates the considerable power that the local political estab-

lishment, led by the *Los Angeles Times* and the Better America Federation, could muster when challenged in a school board race by a liberal outsider like Reverend Oxnam.

Although these essays do not always coincide with his interpretations, Carey McWilliams no doubt would have enjoyed this volume. McWilliams viewed Southern California as "an archipelago of social and ethnic islands, economically interrelated but culturally disparate."[28] These articles traverse these isles at a deeper level, exposing their distinctiveness as well as their interconnections. To McWilliams Los Angeles was "not merely a testing ground," but "also a forcing ground, a place where ideas, practices, and customs must prove their worth or be discarded."[29] The same may be said of the city's history. The writers assembled here have tested *Southern California* and other earlier chronicles, accepting what remains viable and discarding what no longer rings true, while inevitably casting their own ideas into the forcing ground of history.

NOTES

1. Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (1946; Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1973), ix.

2. Carey McWilliams, *The Education of Carey McWilliams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978, 1979), 42–45.

3. McWilliams, *Southern California,* x; McWilliams, *Education,* 44.

4. McWilliams, *Education,* 45, 42; McWilliams, *Southern California,* 376–77.

5. McWilliams, *Southern California,* 238.

6. David Brodsly, *L.A. Freeway: An Appreciative Essay* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 91.

7. McWilliams, *Southern California,* 114, 136.

8. Albert W. Atwood, "Money from Everywhere," *Saturday Evening Post,* May 12, 1923, 10.

9. Guy W. Finney, *The Great Los Angeles Bubble: A Present Day Story of Colossal Financial Jugglery and of Penalties Paid* (Los Angeles: Milton Forbes, 1929), 9.

10. McWilliams, *Southern California,* xiii, 138.

11. Ibid., 6, 104, 313.

12. Ibid., 13, 293, 169, 303.

13. Ibid., 227.

14. Ibid., 232. See also Sarah Comstock, "The Great American Mirror: Reflections from Los Angeles," *Harper's Monthly,* May 1928, 715–23.

15. James Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

16. McWilliams, *Southern California,* 350, 166–70.

17. Ibid., 232–49, 342.

18. Ibid., 350.

19. Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

20. McWilliams, *Southern California,* 350–70.

21. W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1941).

22. See, for example, Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880–1970* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

23. McWilliams, *Southern California,* 313.

24. Ibid., 290–92.

25. Robert Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850–1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); Robert Gottlieb and Irene Wolt, *Thinking Big: The Story of the Los Angeles Times* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1977). Other earlier books include Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of the Modern City* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987); Louis Perry and Richard Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911–1941* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963); Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); John Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation: The Japanese in Los Angeles, 1900–1942* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Gregory H. Singleton, *Religion in the City of Angels: American Protestant Culture and Urbanization, 1850–1930* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1979). In addition to these books, several significant doctoral dissertations appeared. On the 1920s see especially James C. Findlay, "The Economic Boom of Los Angeles in the 1920s" (Ph. D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1958); and Leonard Leader, "Los Angeles and the Great Depression" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1972). There is also a rich body of articles in scholarly journals and collections.

26. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990); Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

27. The new generation of books includes Edith Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody's Sister* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1993); Brian Masaru Hayashi, *'For the Sake of Our Japanese Brethren': Assimilation, Nationalism and Protestantism among the Japanese of Los Angeles, 1895–1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and Los Angeles* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Tom Sitton, *John Randolph Haynes: California Progressive* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Raphael J. Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Jules Tygiel, *The Great Los Angeles Swindle: Oil, Stocks, and Scandal during the Roaring Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

28. McWilliams, *Southern California,* 314.

29. Ibid., 370.