I. COLORADO

Dotted with glacier lakes and valleys cut fifteen thousand years ago, the Flat Top Mountains in northwestern Colorado form a majestic wilderness populated by mule deer, elk, black bears, mountain lions, and golden eagles. At their highest elevations, the mountains are nearly barren cliffs and rock outcrops; farther down, the forests mix spruce, Douglas fir, aspen, and stands of Lodgepole pine. In the spring, the melting snow pack drains into small tributary creeks that flow through grasslands teeming with Oregon grape, blueberry, thimbleberry, and a rich assortment of wildflowers. The creeks form the headwaters of the Yampa River, which meanders north through the wetlands and wide valleys of the Upper Yampa River Basin, where the native Ute Indians spent their summers as far back as the fourteenth century. From there, the Yampa River heads due west, traversing dry sagebrush ranges and canyons before joining the Green River in Utah.

The prehistory of the Upper Yampa ended in 1865, when French trappers heard a chugging sound resembling that of a steamboat. The noise was produced by natural hot springs, and the name Steamboat Springs was born. A decade later, the first white settler built a cabin in the area, and a few years after that, Indian agent Nathan Meeker tried to convert the Utes to farming. When that proved unsuccessful, he called in the U.S. Army in September 1879. The same month, the Utes killed Meeker and seven other agency members in what became known as the Meeker Massacre. They also attacked troops heading for the area, killing nine men. When reinforcements arrived, they subdued the Utes and moved them to a reservation in Utah. Following that forced departure, a trickle of whites began to settle the Upper Yampa. Trappers gave way to miners, who plumbed the area’s rich mineral resources. When the veins played out, many of the min-
ers turned to ranching, and by the late nineteenth century, the town of Steamboat Springs had several hundred residents.

Like many western towns, Steamboat Springs attracted Americans in search of dry air, better health, and economic opportunity. Jeremiah Newby McWilliams, a young man with lung trouble from Plattsburg, Missouri, was one such resident. Born in 1865, he had worked in a men’s clothing store in nearby Kansas City before arriving in Steamboat Springs in 1886, just seven years after the Meeker Massacre. The town then consisted of a livery stable, a stagecoach inn, a blacksmith shop, four saloons, and a dry goods store called the New York Emporium (ECM, 29). With a five-thousand-dollar stake borrowed from wealthy relatives, the twenty-one-year-old Jerry McWilliams and two partners bought the dry goods store. The store also hosted the local post office, and most of the county’s residents passed through its doors to purchase goods or to collect mail.

Tall, energetic, and enterprising, Jerry McWilliams became acquainted with the local landowners as well as the town’s most recent arrivals. Soon he was also dealing in cattle and real estate and canvassing the small town for willing investors. According to local historian John Rolfe Burroughs, whose father was McWilliams’s business partner, Jerry McWilliams was “the only man in the county who could be in two places at the same time: at either end of Lincoln Avenue (Steamboat Springs’ Main Street), intercepting strangers who came to town from either direction, ascertaining how much money they had, and seeing to it that it was invested in such a manner that he earned a commission on the transaction” (Burroughs 1962, 252).

In the fall of 1894, Jerry met Harriet Casley, an Iowa native who grew up in Beloit, Kansas. A normal school graduate and the town’s new school-teacher, the twenty-one-year-old was “an exceedingly attractive brunette” who drew attention in the small frontier town (Burroughs 1962, 253). In February 1895, in her first year on the job, she married Jerry. Her family had little in common with his, apart from a generally conservative outlook. Catholic and Republican, the Casleys were first- and second-generation immigrants; Harriet’s mother was from Hamburg, and her father was born in New York State of French-Canadian parents. The McWilliams clan, in contrast, consisted of Scotch-Irish Democrats, mostly native-born Protestants of prerevolutionary stock. Toward the end of his life, Carey McWilliams described his paternal grandfather, “Captain Sam” McWilliams, as a “Gothic American type”: a cantankerous, hard-shell Bap-
tist who led Confederate troops and married a woman with a slave. “I can imagine no two couples more dissimilar than my paternal and maternal grandparents,” McWilliams observed in his memoir. “If they had ever met, I don’t know what they would have had to talk about except the weather and the family connection” (ECM, 23).

Jerry’s retail business folded, and he turned to cattle and real estate full-time. With initial support from the Carey family of Wyoming, one of the largest cattle operators in the region, he began buying and selling livestock. Along with two partners, both southerners, he also opened a real estate office and sold ranches in and around the area. The real estate business picked up following the announcement that a rail line would connect Denver and Steamboat Springs. In 1900, Jerry sold forty-one ranches, including five in one week, and added oil speculation to his portfolio of investment opportunities. The next year, he opened a butcher shop and, according to the local newspaper, acquired “one of the swellest rubber-tired buggies ever to reach Routt County” (Burroughs 1962, 254).

In January 1902, Jerry began building a family home on a ranch outside Steamboat Springs. The next month, Harriet gave birth to their first son, Samuel Walter Casley McWilliams, known as Casley. On December 13, 1905, she had a second son, Edmund Carey McWilliams. The first name, never used, was that of Jerry’s brother, who ran a small newspaper in Missouri and was active in Democratic politics there. Later, Jerry claimed that his son’s middle name derived not from the Carey family in Wyoming but from the Cary family in Colorado, which owned a large ranch west of Steamboat Springs and eventually sponsored him in state politics. “The logic escapes me, but so it came to be,” Carey McWilliams noted in his memoir (ECM, 30).

In 1908, the rail line from Denver to Steamboat Springs was completed. Jerry arranged for a rail stop on his property and busily bought and sold cattle by the carload. He also became more involved in Democratic Party politics. Along with other prominent citizens, he helped select the candidates and delegates for county and state offices. In 1914, local banker J. H. Burroughs, who served for many years as chair of the county’s Republican Central Committee, bought out Jerry’s real estate partners. The McWilliams & Burroughs office soon became a place for conducting political business as well as land transactions. Burroughs’s son described the office as follows:
A third of the front room was enclosed by a railing behind which there were desks, a safe, a typewriter, and the paraphernalia customarily found in an active business office. The larger area, which might be likened to a foyer, contained ten or a dozen captain’s chairs ranged along the wall, with a big brass cuspidor between every second chair, above which elk, deer, and antelope heads and a stuffed duck or two hung on the wall. In the big display windows, various prize-winning specimens of agricultural produce—barley, oats, wheat, and alfalfa tied in neat sheaves—testified to the richness of Routt County soil. (Burroughs 1962, 255)

Carey’s recollection, inscribed in his diary at age twenty-four, was more impressionistic and less flattering. For him, the office of McWilliams & Burroughs was a place of “musty old gents, scratching their balls, farting at the stove and doing double-entry bookkeeping” (June 6, 1930).

With its game trophies and sheaves of grain, the real estate office also symbolized the local residents’ intimate if somewhat instrumental relationship with the land. Many local enterprises and activities moved with the seasons. The ranchers drove their cattle from their winter feedlots to the open sagebrush range west of Steamboat Springs, where the calves were born. In early summer, they rounded up the cattle and drove them back to the Yampa Valley and up into the mountains, where they grazed on the lush grasses. In late summer, they rounded up the steers again, drove them down to the valley, and shipped them by rail to Denver. The Rocky Mountain setting for this routine soon gave rise to another seasonal industry: skiing. In 1913, a Norwegian ski instructor named Carl Howelsen visited the area and perceived its potential as a resort. The following year, Steamboat Springs staged its first Winter Carnival, which combined elements of a county fair with winter sports competitions. Under Howelsen’s influence, Carey and other local youngsters were soon practicing jumps and downhill runs. Storm Mountain, whose steep slopes vexed Jerry because they were unsuitable for cattle, was perfect for skiing. The mountain was later renamed Mount Werner after Bud Werner, the first American skier to gain attention in Europe. The Werner family eventually bought the McWilliams’s ranch just outside Steamboat Springs.

The natural splendor made a deep impression on Carey, who developed a lifelong love of geography. As a young man, he recalled the vistas of his boyhood in glowing terms in Westways, a magazine for Southern California automobile club members.
That was a splendid region: sunsets, venison, strawberries, grouse, great ranches of purple sage, valley reverberating in spring with the roar of cascading waters, real mountain streams that never dry up, chokecherries, timberline flowers, the ineffable charm of the Indian summer, mountainous snows, the best skiing in America.

Carey also learned early on to appreciate “the authority of the land”—the power of terrain and climate to shape society. It would become a recurrent theme in his published writings and an almost daily concern in his private ones. Throughout his adult life, even his sparest diary entries took regular note of the weather, air, light, and landscapes that he observed.

A deeply restless man, Jerry McWilliams rarely paused to take in the scenery. One of his partners recalled that 90 percent of their business “was transacted while McWilliams stood at the door, his hat on the back of his head and his hand on the door knob, with the toe of one foot twisting impatiently around the heel of the other” (Burroughs 1962, 257). The local barber also remarked that Jerry’s baldness was a blessing, as he could not sit still long enough for a trim. When he purchased a car, Jerry drove it as he had always ridden his prize horses: as fast as it would go. His Hupmobile clocked forty to forty-five miles per hour on the unpaved road between his ranch and his Steamboat Springs office, making him something of a local menace.

Jerry also cut a curious figure on his ranch. The cowhands, who were “enormously style-conscious,” found his appearance ludicrous, and Carey learned to see him through their eyes.

He wore flat-heeled boots, for example. Wouldn’t use spurs. His saddle and his stirrups were those of a farmer, just impossible, you know. If he tried to rope, he’d get himself all tangled up in the rope. He wore a coat and a vest, collar and a black tie, and a flat-brimmed black hat that, you know, a Mormon bishop would have worn. (HAT, 21)

Jerry’s limited taste for alcohol, which he kept locked up along with his firearms, also distinguished him from the ranch hands. Even so, he commanded the respect of his employees, largely because he was an “absolutely, astonishingly phenomenal judge of livestock” (HAT, 21). When the First World War drove up beef prices, he began buying thousands of yearling steers from New Mexico and Arizona. Upon their arrival
in Steamboat Springs, he fattened them up for a year and sold them for beef in Denver. Appraising his father’s enterprise, Carey later recalled that it was “a great market while it lasted; one season we ran seventeen thousand head of cattle on the open range” (ECM, 31). During that time, Jerry became Steamboat Spring’s richest and most prominent citizen.

Toward the end of his life, Carey described his parents as “hard-working, practical, energetic, no-nonsense types.” Harriet “was a warm, friendly, kindly person; my father was no less friendly but often self-absorbed and less responsive.” Their devotion to their sons was real but mostly unexpressed. Indeed, “any audible or visible show of affection was regarded somehow as bad form.” There was little time for leisure, and their daily routines did not include one-on-one time with their children: “Neither had time to ‘play’ with us or to keep a close eye on our activities,” McWilliams noted (ECM, 33). Even so, he described his privileged, unsupervised boyhood in positive terms and idealized his parents’ hands-off approach to child rearing.

My parents were ideal parents in an ideal setting in a way because they were both very busy, no-nonsense types . . . And they let us roam pretty wild, do what we wanted to do. After all, what the hell? What could we do to harm ourselves? We might break a leg or something, you know, but there were no social menaces of any kind. (HAT, 11)

The boys were assigned chores that included haying, milking the cows, mending fences, and taking part in cattle drives and roundups. Both were given a string of ponies, and Carey shod and groomed the four in his charge: Tram, Navajo, Dick, and Buttons. He later recalled that he and Casley spent “more time in the company of cowhands than we did with our parents” (ECM, 34). By all accounts, the McWilliams household reinforced hard work, autonomy, and emotional self-sufficiency at every turn, and young Carey learned his lessons well.

In 1916, Jerry McWilliams succeeded John Cary as state senator, and the family began spending winters in Denver, where Jerry also had a seat on the local stock exchange. By that time, the family’s frequent trips to the capital had sparked Carey’s affinity for city life, complete with fine hotels and steak dinners. Wintering there added another layer of charm, he recalled later: “The Christmas glitter, the bright lights, the wintertime background, made Denver seem like a fairyland city” (ECM, 35). He was
less enthusiastic about the school that he and Casley attended in Denver. Jerry’s friends had recommended Wolfe Hall Military Academy, also known as the Collegiate Military School for Boys, a private school run by Episcopalians. Decades later, Carey described it in unflattering terms.

It was grotesque. So far as the boarding pupils were concerned, you might refer to it as a quite expensive, high-class reformatory, [laughter] because these were kids who were from Wyoming and New Mexico and all around whose parents had apparently had quite a bit of difficulty with them. (HAT, 17–18)

The two brothers did not object, however. “My brother and I couldn’t bring ourselves to tell our parents that they had made quite a misjudgment about this place, so we made the best of it” (18). The lack of communication is telling; by this account, the boys preferred to attend a school they disliked rather than discuss the matter with their parents. Both boys eventually graduated from Steamboat Springs High School, but Carey had positive memories of one Wolfe Hall teacher, a graduate of Bowdoin and Harvard and “quite a literary kind of guy” (18).

Carey, too, was becoming quite a literary kind of guy. Ever the schoolteacher, Harriet read Twain, Scott, and Cooper to the boys, and the bookshelf at home included Dickens, George Eliot, and popular Westerns by Owen Wister and others. Carey would later indicate, however, that nothing in his home environment encouraged serious reading or study.

It is hardly necessary to say that I did not grow up in an intellectual household. My father glanced at local newspapers and occasionally read the Denver papers. But I have few memories of seeing him with a book in his hand. My mother, a high-school graduate, always subscribed to one or more popular magazines and liked to read but found little time for it. (ECM, 36)

Nor did Jerry encourage Carey’s early dreams of becoming a writer. The plan was that Casley would take over the ranching operation and Carey would run the family’s real estate business. Carey was more interested in his uncle’s newspaper back in Missouri, but Jerry considered journalism an unpromising profession composed mostly of riffraff. As a young man, Carey noted in his writing journal that his father “viewed with the greatest disfavor my leanings toward the purple—the journalic [sic], literary life. The
only composition of mine he ever read was a paper of mine on Theo. Roosevelt—(written when about 15)—which he praised rather guardedly—as he never liked Roosevelt.”

Casley later recalled Carey’s predilection for reading and the indoor life more generally.

My younger brother seemed to have his nose in a book most of the time. He had a fine string of cowhorses and made a good hand. However, he did not get the thrill and excitement I did out of being a cowboy. At one time he took piano lessons. They were discontinued for 2 reasons, he thought they were sissified and Harriet wanted him to get outdoors more. Later he regretted this action . . . Books, music, politics and social life (girls) were far more entertaining and enjoyable.

Both boys played football at Steamboat Springs High School, but while Casley relished it, Carey participated largely because the entire school enrolled only thirteen boys. According to Casley, “Carey was not too keen for the game, he was really too small, but it did have social advantages.” In one game, Carey made a shoestring tackle on a much larger player and wrenched his knee: “The ladies rushed on the field, helped him into our car, covered him with blankets and fed him hot chocolate.” Casley’s recollections suggest that Carey’s boyhood, with or without the piano lessons, was not especially rugged, and this may have been a sensitive point for him. As a young man, he worked hard to distinguish himself from other bookish types, who struck him as anemic, and he was especially concerned to construct a literary identity that radiated vigor.

He found that sort of vigor in the *Smart Set*, the monthly magazine of literature, criticism, and opinion coedited at that time by H. L. Mencken (*HAT*, 19). The *Smart Set*’s goal, as outlined by Mencken to the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1914, was “to be lively without being nasty. On the one hand, no smut, and on the other, nothing uplifting. A magazine for civilized adults in their lighter moods. A sort of frivolous sister to the *Atlantic*” (Teachout 2002, 109). Despite these modest goals, the magazine made a significant contribution to American letters. As Edmund Wilson later wrote, Mencken put his foot through the genteel tradition of American literature by scorning high-minded novels and promoting the works of Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Ambrose Bierce, Jack London, Frank Norris, Willa Cather, and Upton Sinclair (Wilson 1965, 31). In doing so,
Mencken cleared the way for bolder forms of American literature. Few of his literary judgments have withstood the test of time, and many of his social and political views became stale or objectionable even during his lifetime. Yet his influence was everywhere in the 1920s, and his energetic style and distinctive diction redefined literary journalism. As a teenager, Carey eagerly awaited each issue of the Smart Set. When Mencken left that magazine to coedit the American Mercury in 1924, Carey took an equally avid interest in that publication.

As a high school senior, Carey read F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise* while riding in the caboose of a cattle train headed for Denver (ECM, 40). The novel made a profound impression on him. Its protagonist, Amory Blaine, grows up in a wealthy Midwestern family and formulates his “first philosophy, a code to live by, which, as near as it can be named, was a sort of aristocratic egotism” (Fitzgerald 1920, 16–17). Blaine enrolls at Princeton, where he displays a keen interest in class, manners, clothes, parties, books, the college literary magazine, and women. His father dies during his first term, and Blaine becomes aware of his family’s finances for the first time. After a series of adventures and misadventures, including a stint in the army during the First World War, Blaine finds himself in New York City, where he works for an advertising agency and is repulsed by the indigent: “I detest poor people,’ thought Amory suddenly. ‘I hate them for being poor. Poverty may have been beautiful once, but it’s rotten now’” (236). Blaine’s attitude masks his own fear of penury, and in an odd conversation with a successful businessman, he even hazards some praise for the Russian Revolution. At the end of the novel, Blaine’s inner life is still in flux.

There was no God in his heart; his ideas were still in riot; there was ever the pain of memory; the regret for his lost youth—yet the waters of disillusion left a deposit on his soul, responsibility and a love of life, the faint stirring of old ambitions and unrealized dreams. (260)

Experimental in form and daring for its time, *This Side of Paradise* has been compared to other “generational” works, such as J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*. Mencken praised it in the Smart Set as “a truly amazing first novel—original in structure, extremely sophisticated in manner, and adorned with a brilliancy that is as rare in American writing as honesty is in American statecraft” (Fitzgerald 1920, xix). Three years later, the young
McWilliams reread the novel and found that it still spoke to him. He noted in his diary, “This is my favorite, its philosophy is mine, its milieu was mine, I am convinced by it, I believe in its reality, which is the important thing” (May 3, 1923). The claim that the milieu was his is especially striking. When McWilliams first read the novel, he was a teenager on a cattle train in a remote frontier town, not an undergraduate at an Ivy League college. His everyday experience consisted of riding his horse home from school and defying his mother’s wishes by passing the saloons and brothels where the cowhands spent their pay. But if his youthful claim neglected the differences between his world and Amory Blaine’s, it successfully expressed his aspirations and the power of his identification with Fitzgerald’s fictional world.

As a college student, Carey conceded the flaws of the novel without distancing himself from it emotionally.

Why is it that “This Side of Paradise” more than any other contemporary piece of fiction is so dear to my heart. That it is nonsensical I will admit; sentimental; over-romantic—yes, true, but there is in it also something of the picture of youth giving ‘off calories of virtue,’—of the process of disillusion—something of the inevitable reward for Celtic foolishness that I like. Unconsciously perhaps, Fitzgerald has given a picture of youth that is conscious and true,—his idea of showing the clash of Amory vs. the Girls is excellent. Of course the whole thing is affected. (WJ, July 18, 1923)

In a September 1927 article for Sports and Vanities, he identified another source of the novel’s appeal by noting that the book was “about the sadness of youth.” A note from Fitzgerald had prompted the insight: “You liked This Side of Paradise because it was written in depression or despair,” Fitzgerald suggested (ECM, 40). Even toward the end of his life, however, McWilliams resisted that conclusion. After mentioning Fitzgerald’s suggestion, his memoir downplays it.

Perhaps; but I was not in a state of depression or despair: I was rebellious. The book was like a breath of fresh air. Just to be able to say, “why, that’s how I feel!” was in itself a liberating experience. The conventional literary culture was stuffy, boring, and empty; it invited rebellion. (ECM, 40)

The novel, which Edmund Wilson had characterized as a “gesture of infinite revolt,” was surely liberating to the young McWilliams. More inter-
esting, perhaps, is the retrospective denial of depression and despair. In fact, Fitzgerald’s novel entered McWilliams’s life during a period of intense crisis, one for which no fourteen-year-old can be prepared.

THE COLLAPSE

In December 1919, Jerry McWilliams collapsed during a special session of the state legislature. A headline in the *Steamboat Pilot* announced, “Senator McWilliams Ill: Nervous Breakdown Suffered by Routt County Stockman” (Burroughs 1962, 353). Citing a letter from Harriet, the same paper reported a week later that Jerry was “fast recovering from a nervous breakdown . . . Mr. McWilliams was ill of influenza and did not take proper care of himself and since that time has not been in the best physical condition.” The paper also reported that “it became necessary for him to go at once to California under orders from the physician” (Meyer 1996, 46). Carey remained in Denver with Casley.

Jerry’s collapse was total—physical, mental, and financial. Like many of his peers, he had borrowed funds to purchase cattle aggressively during the First World War. He then watched prices fall as Argentine beef, blockaded from the United States during wartime, flooded the market. “All of these great cattle operators went down like a row of tenpins, one after the other,” his son recalled later. “They all went bankrupt, lost their holdings and so forth, including my father.”4 Suffering from what appears to have been clinical depression, Jerry soon entered the State Hospital for the Insane in Pueblo, Colorado. He died in 1921, on his twenty-sixth wedding anniversary, following an operation for gallstones and appendicitis. In a recent interview, however, his grandson speculated that Jerry’s death might have been a suicide.5

In his recollections of that period, Carey McWilliams noted that the collapse ended the pastoral phase of his life. His world in Steamboat Springs, which had seemed as solid and timeless as the Rocky Mountains, turned out to be fragile and transitory. He was otherwise tightlipped about what was arguably the most consequential event of his life. In his private writings, he raised the topic only twice, and both passages suggest a harrowing experience. A journal entry he recorded at age seventeen described a difficult period that reminded him of his father’s distress.
And this turmoil seems to me to be but a vague foreboding of the agony that is to be. I have seen my Father a raving maniac & helped to care for him so I know, graphically & truly, just what insanity means,—an unleashing of all the powerful, inevitable passions of darkness that combat & tear the soul to pieces & when the fury ceases life has left—has been driven out. (WJ, Mar. 6, 1923)

In one form or another, and for the rest of his life, he would devote much of his energy to resisting, controlling, and harnessing those passions of darkness.

Jerry’s economic and psychological collapse presented Carey with a stark choice: He could blame his father or the political and economic forces that had destroyed him. He chose the latter option.6 “I got my comeuppance in the ways of laissez-faire capitalism in the wake of World War I,” he recalled more than a half century later. “The experience made me a premature skeptic and a rebel and permanently impaired my confidence in ‘the system’” (ECM, 27). In his oral history, he specifically linked his distrust of that system to his family’s financial collapse in Colorado (HAT, 79). His efforts to correct that system were characterized by a devotion to rationality, a commitment to social justice, and a penchant for social planning. All three set him at odds with American capitalism. For him, free markets were not a useful if imperfect way to create wealth and deliver goods and services; rather, they were wild forces that tore souls to pieces.

Privately, too, he would build a bulwark against the psychological instability that undid his father. His main defenses would be hard work, intellectualization, a retreat from affect, and steady recourse to alcohol, especially as a young man. Each had implications for his relationships. His graceful manners, intelligence, good judgment, and essential decency would win him many friends over his lifetime, and he maintained those friendships well. Throughout his life, however, his emotional reserve also thwarted the development of more intimate relationships, and his self-sufficiency made him a somewhat detached if consistently benign son, brother, husband, and father.

At nineteen, Carey considered drawing on his father’s experience for his fiction.

I could, and I may, create an immortal character in literature by the por-
trayal of the life of my father. I know my theme—it is a typical one; I know the character & his life. Ah I could do it—and do it well. But it would be malicious—it would show him as a really fine man at heart, meaning well, but reduced to a buffoon by pioneer life. He failed to develop within, that together with the riotous living of his early days—(of which I have only rumors)—brought about his downfall, his complete collapse. What a tragedy he represented in those 14 months before death! Poor mindless man! . . . What a sordid, yet pitiful picture it was—incoherent, babbling, yet poignant,—and (by the end), a play of satanic humor . . . The first eve of his breakdown: I can remember the anguish of his expression—the deepest, profoundest melancholy; the way he smothered my face in kisses—called me “his precious boy”—everything. It showed he was tottering on the edge of an abyss—and knew it . . . And yet withal he was a “good scout.” (WJ, Aug. 24, 1925)

Beginning with raw literary ambition—or, perhaps, an urge to express in fiction what was otherwise difficult to broach—this passage touches on a wide range of emotions, including compunction, pity, and terror. Its unflinching objectivity and patronizing benediction also suggest an effort to master the trauma of his father’s collapse by distancing himself from it. Below its surface, too, lurks painful disappointment in the fragility of what had seemed to be a sturdy family system. His father’s emotional demonstrations after the breakdown—symptoms of madness, not expressions of love or humanity—only made it worse.

Written before his collapse, Jerry’s will included a painfully ironic coda labeled “A Last Word to My Sons.” It read, “Do not speculate or seek to get rich too quickly. Be patient, be morally right, keep a clear conscience and good company, although you may die a pauper be honorable in all things” (ECM, 37–38). The young McWilliams took the financial advice to heart; throughout his life, he never owned a share of stock. To pay off its debts, the family sold steers for twenty-eight dollars that Jerry had purchased for sixty dollars (Burroughs 1962, 353). Their net worth dropped from $250,000 to a figure below Jerry’s original stake of $5,000.

In the meantime, they soldiered on. Harriet moved to Los Angeles, where she lived in her brother Vern’s apartment building and eventually ran a boarding house. Casley remained in Steamboat Springs to settle the family’s affairs, and Carey finished high school by making the honor roll, delivering a rousing liberal speech at the graduation ceremony, and winning a scholarship to the University of Denver. At sixteen, Carey moved to
Denver with a small allowance and a Ford sedan to begin his freshman year. Founded in 1864 as the Colorado Seminary, the University of Denver predated Colorado statehood by twelve years and was the oldest independent university in the Rocky Mountains.

On his own for the first time, McWilliams lived out the Jazz Age ethic as he understood it from Fitzgerald and Mencken. Years later, he recalled that “the romantic and rebellious mood of This Side of Paradise had invaded the campus in my freshman year, and the cultural rebellion was in full swing.”

*The Smart Set* was held in high esteem; we read the books that Mencken praised and had only a slight interest in politics. Most of our energies went into extracurricular activities and high jinks. It was a lively time, the setting was beautiful, and we made the most of it. (ECM, 41)

His notebooks recount his romantic escapades and drinking adventures, and Casley later recalled that his brother was expelled from his fraternity for dating the head of the fraternity’s girlfriend. McWilliams soon discovered, however, that this private Methodist college did not lend itself to his sort of rebellion. In March of his freshman year, he was expelled after a “disastrous St. Patrick’s Day spree,” the details of which he omitted in his memoir and other accounts of his life (ECM, 41).

Now the young McWilliams’s situation diverged even more obviously from Amory Blaine’s salad days at Princeton. His father was dead following a serious mental illness, the family fortune was lost, and he had been expelled from college during his first year. The next day, the seventeen-year-old boarded a train to join his mother in Southern California. One year later, he wrote in his diary, “Today is the anniversary of my stay in California. Remember as yesterday, leaving Denver . . . the hurried, rather tragic farewell & then the feeling of sadness & sorrow—such as youth alone can feel—as I boarded the train” (Mar. 18, 1923). Of his departure, he wrote dramatically, “I left happiness & my lost youth there in the distance.”