

Carey McWilliams. California: The Great Exception. Foreword by Lewis H. Lapham. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. xiv + 377 pages; paper \$14.95.

Although originally written over fifty years ago, McWilliams' book has not lost any relevance with the 1998 reprint. Reading the book in February 2001, there was one line that caused a huge smile: ". . . in California, the lights went on all at once, in a blaze, and they have never been dimmed." But, now later in the year 2001 with no signs of the predicted doom of power outages, McWilliams' thesis of California being an exception to every rule still seems to hold true.

Fifty years later, all of McWilliams' chapter topics are still the stuff of the front pages: Central Valley and Colorado River water, technology, agriculture and latifundia, brushfires, floods, state versus federal controls, exploited cheap labor, and diversity beyond any other place in the world. Although used in a chapter on agriculture, one of McWilliams' subtitles, "The World In Miniature," can be used to describe many facets of California, past and present.

McWilliams' thesis is that California is unlike any other state in the Union, the great exception to every rule. Its very inception and statehood are early examples. California was an isolated backwater. With the discovery of gold, it quickly became one of the most multicultural places in the world and remains so today. The territorial phase was skipped entirely. Californians could not wait to go through the plodding steps of territorial government, and they knew their gold gave them leverage. They simply adopted a constitution and presented a done deal to the Union. Californians were not like everyone else!

Throughout the book, McWilliams makes great use of statistics, especially demonstrating growth. Two sections subtitled "California's Growing Pains" and "Planning by Indirection" are full of demographic statistics showing unimaginable growth, everything from number of high school graduates to amounts of money spent by lobbyists. Business growth was unparalleled. California became the western financial center and the American window to the Orient. California did not fade with the fading luster of mining returns, it just filled the gap with new booms. Agriculture, oil, aerospace, technology, and the glamour of Hollywood fueled the growth and provided a continuous string of attractions. People poured into the state. How could their needs be met? That again is a demonstration of the "great exception." Somehow it all worked and the growth continued. The luster of gold dimmed but California did not.

McWilliams singles out the period 1940-1948 as the "fabulous boom." The wartime expansion produced growth beyond belief. He notes that with the end of the war severe reductions were expected. But, the opposite happened. The boom of industrialization, especially in southern California, continued. Manufacturing growth from 1945-1948 actually exceeded wartime growth. Another example of the great exception.

For all the superlatives, California does have some disadvantages. McWilliams singles out weather as the single most important problem. He describes California rainfall as the "leftovers" after Washington and Oregon had their fill. McWilliams compares California to a one-legged giant, water being the disability. In the three years before he finished the book, California had experienced a three-year "dry cycle." In a short 1½ page section subtitled "How Not to Conserve Water," he points to wasteful farming practices supported by a government buying "surplus" crop yields and afraid to implement

more rational crop selection and water management practices. His section on the Santa Barbara water in 1945-1948 is very interesting.

The story of California is one boom after another – gold, agriculture, tourism, oil, Hollywood, World War II industrial growth, aerospace, and technology. And, with these booms came the excesses for which California is also known. Sadly, there seems to be no rational planning, just growth. So it always depends on having one more boom in the future. If you take McWilliams' 1948 statistics and add 50 years, it is scary. On page 8, McWilliams writes, "It is expected that 20,000,000 people will eventually reside within its boundaries." The exception seems to continue!

In his conclusion, McWilliams moves from the exception of California to the problem of California. Its size overwhelmed its neighbors and in 1949 unemployment reached 14% in California. And, with its growth, it was outstripping its resources, especially power and water. He mentions the Columbia and Colorado Rivers with respect to both power and water, and touches on interstate feuds that existed in 1948. He also notes the 1940s plans of the Bureau of Reclamation for 134 projects on the Colorado River, but asks the questions: Which would be built, in which order, and for whose benefit? Questions that are still greatly unanswered or moot.

McWilliams had a winner in 1948 and perhaps even more so in 2001. Should California and the West settle down and do some serious planning and make some tough decisions – or just hope to pull another boom out of the future before the current boom slows?

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