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## Remembering Carey McWilliams

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Anton Refregier. PREACHING AND FARMING AT MISSION DOLORES. Rincon Center, 1941-48. Anton Refregier (1905—1979) won the government-sponsored competition for the decoration of the Rincon Annex Post Office in 1941. Charged with the subject of Northern California history, Refregier began the murals that year but ceased work during World War II and did not complete the project until seven years later. During the intervening time, the artist agreed to make several changes requested by special interest groups. The results, however, remained controversial. In 1953, members of the United States House of Representatives argued that the murals contained subversive Communist propaganda and should be destroyed. However, Refregier and his supporters prevailed. The murals may be seen today at the restored Rincon Center on Mission Street in downtown San Francisco. This twenty-seven panel series begins with California Indians and the arrival of the Spanish, then proceeds to Preaching and Farming at Mission Dolores. In this panel, Refregier agreed to reduce the bulk of the priest in order to avoid offending the Catholic church. He placed the Indian laborers in the foreground to emphasize their importance making the church-owned land

profitable. Although he was careful to keep his Marxist political beliefs to himself, his interest in economic development and labor tensions is evident in his choice of subjects. Remembering Carey McWilliams FORREST G. ROBINSON How many students of the American West, especially those under forty, will recognize the name Carey McWilliams? A few, I suppose, though the recognition won't in most cases go much beyond the name, and the intimation perhaps that he (some may surmise that Carey is a woman's name) wrote something, a long time ago, about California. Not many will have read *Southern California Country* (1946) and *California: The Great Exception* (1949), nor will many be familiar with *Factories in the Field* (1939), the book that combined with Steinbeck's masterpiece to bring public attention and sympathy to the suffering and injustice endured by farmworkers in depression-era California.<sup>4</sup> How can it be that a historian and social critic of such distinction, who once spoke with authority to a vast national audience on topics as pressing today as they were in 1939, can have slipped so precipitously from view? That question grows more puzzling when we reflect that McWilliams was also well known and equally well respected during and after World War II for his bold, unexampled books, generally with a western focus, on racial minorities, and for his courageous resistance, during two decades as editor of *The Nation*, to the cold war and McCarthyism. Scholars under forty are certainly too young to have read *The Nation* when it featured such writers as James Baldwin, Theodore Roszak, William Appleman Williams, and Ralph Nader and critically pursued the Hiss case, the CIA, Jimmy Hoffa, the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, Nixon, and Watergate. All the more reason for concern that the McWilliams legacy of historical scholarship, journalism, and social and political criticism has so retreated from the regional consciousness. In McWilliams's work, wrote David F. Selvin in 1974, "racial minorities and ethnic communities broke through the solid ranks of the white, Anglo-Saxon, wealthy Protestants who wrote — and around whom is written— so much of our history. History as McWilliams wrote it lost its pallor and began to acquire a healthy, lifelike color" (Selvin 175). This great— brilliant, wide-ranging, prescient, and courageous— western advocate/historian, who wrote with truth and justice chiefly in mind, and who addressed virtually all the issues that today dominate the regional foreground, has somehow slipped from view. Again, how can this be? As a historian whose major regional contributions were published more than fifty years ago, McWilliams has been obscured in good part by the mountain of scholarship that has been published since the midcentury. The recent revival of interest in the West has rapidly expanded the materials available to younger regional scholars, creating the impression perhaps that the books worth consulting have all been...



Anton Refregier. *PREACHING AND FARMING AT MISSION DOLORES*. Rincon Center, 1941–48.

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