

In Memoriam

WILSON CAREY McWILLIAMS

(1933-2005)

Wilson Carey McWilliams, Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University and editorial board member of this journal, died on March 29, 2005.

Though his interests and writing spanned the field of political science, McWilliams had a particular ear for the music of American political life, and it was to articulating the notes of that song that he dedicated most of his energy.

His first major work, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (1973), for which he was awarded the National Historical Society Prize, sounded the themes that would become his refrain. In American political history, modern liberal theory, with its basic assumptions of human individualism, has become ever more ascendant. Modern liberalism teaches that fraternity is an as-yet unachieved end of politics, one that can be realized with the dissolution of all particular ties among particular people in communities. This teaching undermines the ancient theory that it is *only* through those particular bonds and relations that an individual can truly be formed, and that even well-formed individuals can never transcend their firm locations in particular settings. That ancient theory has had a voice in an “alternative” American tradition, emanating particularly from those ethnic and religious communities that remained relatively cohesive in the years following immigration. But that voice has begun to falter.

The assault on fraternity by modern philosophy—in the name of fraternity, ironically enough—actually has threatened the possibility of individual cultivation by promising the realization of an unachievable state that lingers perpetually outside the grasp of embodied and embedded humans. As a result, the lives of Americans have increasingly been shaped by “the experience of isolation, the expectation of loss, the logic of withdrawal.” Americans do have the sense that there is “something missing” in their lives, but “they are without knowledge of what the needed thing might be or resemble, which raises not only the danger of passing it by but of anger which is objectless—as lonely and universal as society itself.”

McWilliams felt deeply a crisis of the American soul, a crisis exaggerated by the growing inability of Americans to speak about the soul itself. "If the American agon is elusive, it is because so much of the contest lies *within* Americans rather than *between* them," he wrote in a 1998 essay for *The Review* on "Leo Strauss and the Dignity of American Political Thought." Those who aspire to understand American political life would do well to remember "the truth that there are no souls without longing, only those whose yearning lacks words and harmonies."

McWilliams turned his own eye to the political manifestations of this tongue-tied longing in a long-running series of essays on the meaning of American elections, most of which are collected in his books *The Politics of Disappointment: American Elections, 1976-1994* (1995) and *Beyond the Politics of Disappointment?: American Elections, 1990-1998* (1999). In his just-published essay on the 2004 election (in *The Elections of 2004*, edited by Michael Nelson, 2005), McWilliams saw a public which ached to have its citizenship taken seriously, ached to be asked to do something more than what the President asked them to do: go shopping. Senator Kerry failed in large part because he failed to sense those pains. Though McWilliams found reason to hope that his own Democratic Party was training its ears to hear the cries of the electorate, he worried that it had too few leaders who could well respond to them.

In part this is because so many of those leaders get visibly itchy around questions of faith. And in "American Democracy and the Politics of Faith" (in *Religion Returns to the Public Sphere*, edited by Hugh Heclo and Wilfred McClay, 2003), McWilliams noted that "to the extent that religion ceases to be the basis of moral community" in American life, "we can expect that faith will be more in evidence in public life and argument."

Of course, "the political quality of that disposition will depend on the citizenry's ear for the language of faith," so "secularity calls for schooling in the sacred." In an America where cults and fringe groups abound, where conspiracy theories and paranoias are mainstream stock, McWilliams was "inclined to think that Jefferson was right, that public controversy between confessions that take their doctrines and heritages seriously could do a good deal to make our public life both livelier and saner."

McWilliams knew that suggesting a more contentious role for religion would raise eyebrows and fears. But today, he said, "the risks seem acceptably small; the laws have helped teach religions to observe the democratic civilities, and the public has little

patience with zealots." And there are potential gains, for "the great faiths have something to teach the Republic about the metaphysics of civic morality." Religion "still hears our whispered hope for dignity, and by affirming that, in secular life, human beings are capable of moral agency, responsible to God and each other, faith may call us toward citizenship and self-rule." So "facing a politics defined more and more by oligarchy and indifference, America has worse things to fear than faith."

While McWilliams' publications often articulated the American sense of "homelessness," he himself found a home in the classroom. A consummate lecturer whom William F. Buckley, Jr. once called "the greatest debater in America," McWilliams saw teaching—teaching undergraduates in particular—as his central vocation. In one of his last lectures, he said to his class: "I'll tell you one of the greatest secrets of academic life: If you read books on the scientific method, you will find that you're told that you listen to the evidence, and if the evidence proves you wrong, or someone makes a better argument than you do, you're obligated to change your mind. Well, the real truth is that no one ever does. The place where academic arguments persuade people is where they persuade students. That's how you change the world." McWilliams began his teaching career at Oberlin College, moving briefly to Brooklyn College before his installation at Rutgers in 1970; he also had visiting appointments at UC-Berkeley, UCLA, Fordham University, Harvard University, Haverford College, Lafayette College, SUNY-Buffalo, and Yale University.

McWilliams was a generous spirit, a man "whose giving," to use Robert Frost's words, "somehow touched the principle that all men are created free and equal." His professional munificence earned him the John Witherspoon Award for Distinguished Service to the Humanities in 1989, and his personal largesse was renowned in his community and among his friends and family. Perhaps, though, the only thing that matched the size of McWilliams' heart was his gleefully wicked sense of humor. His was a grand wit, frequently energized by the presence of Bourbon Manhattans, the trademark McWilliams beverage. In his person, McWilliams proved Saul Bellow's dictum that in America, mankind's greatest benefactors tend to be amusing people.

At the time of his death, McWilliams was compiling two collections of his own essays and completing a much-anticipated book on Mark Twain's political thought. These will be published posthumously.

It is fitting that his last days were spent in the company of Twain, an author with whom McWilliams felt a special kinship.

Throughout his career, he was fond of relating Twain's story, "The Turning Point of My Life." As McWilliams told it:

"Twain was asked to write on this rather sappy subject by *Harper's* when he needed the money, so he wrote it. First, Twain says that the real turning point of his life took place in the Garden of Eden – although he only has 5,000 words for the article, so he can't go back that far. So Twain settles for proving that the turning point of his life was when Caesar crossed the Rubicon, an act which inevitably led to Mark Twain writing this article.

"But then Twain goes on to describe a point in his childhood when there was a local measles epidemic. His mother, acting according to the codes of the time, quarantined him in the house, keeping the lights low and playing dirge-like hymns on the organ. Then, Twain said, he decided that life on these miserable terms was not worth living, and he couldn't stand being alone. He went next door, and he got in bed with a friend who had the disease and said, 'There. Now I've got it over with.' And, indeed, Twain did get the disease. And at the end of the article he says, 'And so, gentle reader, you will notice that the turning point of my life was that I got measles when I was twelve years old.'

"Indeed so. What he's telling us is that by getting measles when you're twelve—by deciding that life on certain terms is not worth living—you become free. As long as you believe that life is worth living on any terms, you are not a free person. You're a predictable function. And so the alternative tradition always saw it.

"Human beings are free only to the extent that they can sacrifice—their illusions, their property, their self-conceit, and ultimately, their lives."

McWilliams understood that citizenship itself requires just this kind of sacrifice. If, then, we can learn to become better citizens, we may just find ourselves with lives – as McWilliams himself had – that are truly worth living.

—Susan J. McWilliams