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A Rebel in Barcelona

Jack White's first Spanish impressions

Jack White

November 11th, 1936

I came out to Barcelona as administrator of the second British Red Cross Unit. Two nurses and myself came on in advance to find a site for the hospital of the Unit somewhere on the Teruel front.

Unfortunately the Unit had been cancelled all except four ambulances which are now en route somewhere between Paris and Barcelona. Some of these ambulances are to go, I believe to the first Unit at Grañen. Till they arrive in any case, I am left with no-one to administrate and nothing to do, so a friend in the CNT-FAI has asked me to write my impressions for broadcast or the press.

My first and deepest impression is that of the natural nobility of the Catalan people. I got that impression as early as Port Bou, where we had to spend six hours waiting for the Barcelona train. A bright sun was shining which tempted me to bathe in the bay. After undressing I left my coat, with some 80 English pounds in the pocket, on the rocks close to a frequented path with a sense of its perfect safety. Half an hour in Cataluña and a few conversations in my faulty Spanish had made me feel I was among friends, who appreciated the effort of the British workers and intelligentsia to help their cause. I would not have dared to risk such a large sum of

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money unguarded at any English watering place. Here I felt it was guarded by the revolutionary solidarity of Cataluña and even of the international solidarity of the working class of which Cataluña is now the bulwark.

This impression of revolutionary honour and revolutionary order has been maintained by all I have seen and experienced during the week I have been in Barcelona. On one occasion after a trying morning rushing round after the necessary passes to go on to Valencia - that was before the cancellation of the unit and I wanted to go on to the front to find a place for our hospital as soon as possible - I inadvertently paid my taxi driver four pesetas more than his fare. He brought it back to me remarking "eso sobra". This happened as I was entering the door of the Regional Committee of the CNT-FAI, the headquarters of those terrible Anarchists of whose misdeeds we read so much in the Capitalist Press now. I am not going to enter into controversy, philosophic or political, I simply record my experiences, without fear or favour. It is a fact, that the Barcelona churches were burnt, and many of them, where roof and walls are still standing, are used to house medical or commissariat stores instead of, as previously, being used by the fascists as fortresses. I suspect their present function is nearer the purpose of a religion based by its founder on the love of God and the Neighbour. However that may be, the destruction of the churches has not destroyed love and honesty in Spain. If they are not based on the love of God, they are based on brotherliness, selflessness and self respect, which have to be experienced to be believed. Never, till I came to revolutionary Barcelona, had I seen waiters and even shoeblocks refuse a tip. Here the refusal of anything in excess of the exact bill or fee is as invariable as the courtesy with which it is done. This very courtesy makes one feel mean for having offered it, a benighted bourgeois, automatically continuing bourgeois habits and unable to grasp the self-respect of the workers now they are so largely in control. My first day taught me my lesson. I never offend now.

You will have heard no doubt about the Dublin Rising of 1916. That rising is now thought of as purely a national one, of which the aims went no further than the national independence of Ireland. It is conveniently forgotten that not only was the manifesto published by the "bourgeois" leaders conceived in a spirit of extreme liberal democracy, but, associated with the bourgeois leaders, was James Connolly, the international socialist, who some regarded as the greatest revolutionary fighter and organizer of his day. In command of the Irish Citizen Army, which I had drilled, he made common cause with the Republican separatists against the common Imperial enemy. It is said that he threatened to come out with the Citizen Army alone, if the bourgeois Republicans shirked the issue.

It was then the middle of the great war. the rising was ruthlessly suppressed by England and sixteen of the leaders were executed. Connolly himself, badly wounded in the Dublin Post Office which was shelled to ruins by a British gun-boat, was strapped in a chair and shot by a firing-squad before he recovered.

Here in Cataluña, the union of the working class and nation starts off under better auspices than were possible in Ireland. In Cataluña the internal socialist reconstruction goes hand in hand with the armed fight against Spanish and international fascism. You are in advance of us in Syndico-Anarchist and Socialist construction. You are advance of us in dealing with the clerico-fascist menace. Again and again in Ireland the revolutionary Republican movement comes a bit of the way towards Socialism, and scurries back in terror when the Roman catholic Church looses its artificial thunder of condemnation and excommunication.

I come of an Ulster Protestant family. There is a saying in Ulster (the north-east province of Ireland) "Rome is a lamb in adversity, a snake in equality and a lion in prosperity". I am glad that in Cataluña you have made Rome into a lamb. In Ireland Rome is still a lion, or rather a wolf in sheep's clothing. The priests inflame the mob and then pretend to deplore the mob-violence which they

have instigated. Last Easter Sunday, I had myself to fight for three kilometres against the Catholic actionists, who attacked us on the streets as we were marching to honour the memory of the Republican dead who fell in Easter week 1916. The pious hooligans actually came inside the cemetery and tore up the grave rails to attack us.

In Ireland, as in Spain, it was the priests who started methods of fire and sword against the people. yet they complain bitterly when their own weapons are turned against themselves.

Comrades of Cataluña! In your hour of trial when you hold the barricades not only for yourselves but for us all, I greet you with the voice of revolutionary Ireland, smothered awhile but destined to regain its strength. I hold myself honoured to be among you, to serve if I can in whatever capacity I can be most useful.