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Jack White

Alan MacSimoin

1998

Captain Jack White is known as the man who drilled the Irish Citizen Army during the 1913 lock-out. His later anarchism has been hidden from history by the writers of history books.

White belonged to the Anglo-Irish landowning class. James Robert - always known as Jack, was born in Co Antrim, at Whitehall, Broughshane, just outside Ballymena. As a young man he followed his father into the British army, where he saw action against the Boers in South Africa.

It is said that at the battle of Doorknop he was one of the first to go over the top. Looking back he saw one 17 year old youth shivering with fright in the trench. An officer cried "shoot him". White is said to have covered the officer with his pistol and replied "Do so and I'll shoot you". Not exactly the attitude wanted among the officer classes of the army!

Soon after this he dropped out of the army. Arriving back in Ireland he found Sir Edward Carson's bigoted crusade against Home Rule was in full swing. This was the time when the original UVF was created to threaten war against the British government if Ireland was granted any measure of self-rule.

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Jack organised one of the first Protestant meetings, in Ballymoney, to rally Protestant opinion against the Unionist Party and against what he described as its "bigotry and stagnation", that associated Northern Protestants with conservatism. Another speaker at that meeting, and coming from the same sort of social background, was Sir Roger Casement.

As a result of the Ballymoney meeting Jack was invited to Dublin. Here he met James Connolly and was converted to socialism. Very impressed by the great struggle to win union recognition and resist the attacks of William Martin Murphy and his confederates, he offered his services to the ITGWU at Liberty Hall. He spoke on union platforms with such famous names as Francis Sheehy Skeffington, Big Bill Haywood of the Industrial Workers of the World, and James Connolly.

He put forward the idea of a workers militia to protect picket lines from assaults by both scabs and the blackguards of the Dublin Metropolitan Police. This proposal to create a Citizen Army, drilled by him, was enthusiastically accepted. Its very appearance, as White recollected, "put manners on the police".

He later put his services at the disposal of the Volunteers, believing that a stand had to be taken against British rule by a large body of armed people. He went to Derry where there was a brigade of Volunteers who were largely ex-British Army like himself. But he was shaken by the sectarian attitudes he found. When he tried to reason with them and make the case for workers' unity they dismissed his case as merely sticking up for his own, i.e. Protestants.

When Connolly was sentenced to death after the 1916 rising White rushed to South Wales and tried to bring the miners out on strike to save his life. For his attempts he was given three months imprisonment.

He came home to find himself in a political wilderness. The unionists regarded him as a Shinner. The nationalists regarded him as an Orangeman! He moved towards the newly founded Communist Party which, with the first reports from Russia,

seemed offer hope to humanity. But he had his doubts about them and never joined. Indeed for a time in London he worked with Sylvia Pankhurst's anti-parliamentary communist group, the Workers Socialist Federation.

In 1934 a special convention was held in Athlone which was attended by 200 former IRA volunteers together with a number of prominent socialists, Communists and trade unionists. It resolved that a Republican Congress be formed. This was a movement, based on workers and small farmers, that was well to the left of the IRA. White joined immediately and organised a Dublin branch composed solely of ex-British servicemen. One notable result of this was a contingent of British ex-servicemen marching behind the Congress banner through cheering crowds of Dubliners on a demonstration against war and poverty.

The Congress is best known for bringing 200 Belfast Protestant workers to the republican Wolfe Tone Commemoration that year and for the scandalous attack on them by Sean McBride's IRA men who were determined that no 'red' banners would be seen at their Catholic day out in Bodenstown.

One of the men carrying the second banner - on which was embroidered James Connolly Club, Belfast - The United Irishmen of 1934 - was John Straney, a milk roundsman from loyalist Ballymacarret who was later killed while fighting Franco's army at the Battle of the Ebro in 1939.

Congress later split between those who stood for class independence, those who fought only for the Workers Republic, and those - led by the Communists - who firstly wanted an alliance with Fianna Fail to reunite the country. After the bulk of the first group walked out (many of them demoralised and ending up in the Labour Party) White remained in the depleted organisation. But their reduced size did not reduce the hatred the rich had for them. In April 1936 the Congress contingent tak-

ing part in the annual Easter Commemoration was subjected to attack by blueshirt gangs all along the route.

The main target of the mob was White. Patrick Byrne, the joint secretary with Frank Ryan of the Congress, describes him as a "tall, well built man with a clipped army moustache" who "used his blackthorn stick to advantage in close encounters with his attackers". Inside the cemetery he was badly injured by a blow of an iron cross ripped from a grave. Byrne and a young poet, Tom O'Brien, who also fought in Spain managed to get White away.

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War saw General O'Duffy's blueshirts sending a contingent to help Franco. The Communist Party and leading republicans organised the Connolly Column to fight the Spanish fascists. Incidentally the Irish International Brigade was yet one more example of how Catholics and Protestants fought together in a common class cause. White was thrilled with the collectivisation in Spain, and also with the volunteer militias. He learned with amazement that this was the work of the anarchists.

In addition to his work with the Connolly Column at the front, he trained militia members in the use of firearms. He also trained women in the villages on the way to Saragossa in the use of pistol for defence. What he could not stomach was that the Irish, like all the International Brigadeers, were being increasingly manipulated by the Communist Party. He had never accepted the CP, he had just not seen an alternative. Now he saw that alternative and it was anarchism.

There was a clash between White and Frank Ryan, who accused White of being a 'Trotskyite' and a traitor. White relinquished his International Brigade command and offered his services to the anarchist CNT union. White was asked to work, with the legendary Emma Goldman, for the CNT in London. In the course of a few months in Spain he had become a convinced anarchist.

It was at this time that he wrote the pamphlet 'The Meaning of Anarchism'. He joined the group producing Freedom (the anarchist paper - still published in London - whose founders included Peter Kropotkin), and was one of the organisers of the regular meetings at the National Trade Union Club against Italian fascism and in support of the Spanish anarchists.

At this time White worked with a Liverpool-Irish anarchist, Matt Kavanagh, on a survey of Irish labour history in relation to anarchism. In 1940 White died. His body was hardly cold when the family, ashamed of Jack's revolutionary politics, destroyed all his papers, including a study of the Cork Harbour 'soviet' of 1921.

His importance lies not in what he wrote, for all that survives is one short pamphlet, nor in any particular position he took. His importance lies in the link he provides between Irish working class history of the past and our anarchist vision today. All through his life he tried to organise ordinary people to defend their own interests and to realise the power they had if only they would use it. That is the job we have to continue and complete.