

The anarchist views of Captain Jack White

Veteran of the 1913 lockout, the Irish Citizen Army, the Irish International Brigade

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THE VICTORS write history. A similar truth is derived; that those who have threatened the rule of capitalism or the livelihoods of those at its head have been ill-served by their historical representation. Several pivotal figure in the history of working class self- realisation have been omitted altogether from the dominant texts of our society, thus being rarely mentioned outside of academic debate.

Other figures have been mentioned, yet are constantly misrepresented in the writings of authoritarian ideologues. In other words, those who make the history of our struggle have been rendered one-dimensional figures appearing at one or two key moments; yet whose acts, ideas and motives at other times are deemed inconsequential and unworthy of consideration.

Such a figure has been Captain Jack White. Remembered as the founder of the Irish Citizen Army, Captain White rarely appears in histories after 1914, when he broke with this organisation. White, who had become a socialist after breaking with loyalism and meeting James Connolly, proposed the idea of a workers' militia in 1913.

This was the time of the lock out when the forces of repression stood firmly on the side of William Martin Murphy and his Employers' Federation. White later resigned from the ICA on account of their refusal to dismiss Countess Markievicz who was also a member of the Irish Volunteers, where she rubbed shoulders with anti-socialist and anti-trade union elements. Captain White did not abandon his belief in socialism but rather remained active in the workers' movement.

However, he is seldom mentioned in histories after this point. The reader of most histories does not learn of the development of his politics. How they eventually led to his decision to join the anti-fascist Irish International Brigade during the Spanish Civil War, or how what he witnessed in Spain convinced him of the necessity of anarchism. Neither this, nor his subsequent work in London on behalf of the Spanish anarchists, is recorded in conventional histories.

The publication of Captain White's short 'The Meaning of Anarchism' in pamphlet form, along with a brief biographical sketch of White, is therefore most welcome. Not only does this venture by the Irish anarcho-syndicalist group 'Organise!-IWA' recover a fascinating yet "forgotten" aspect of it author's life but also provides an interesting analysis of the basis of anarchism and how it was applied in the Spanish Civil War. Not only are the aspirations of anarchists touched upon,

but mention is also given to the tragic fate the anarchists ultimately met in this war. Sold out by the CNT leadership and crushed by Stalinist counter-revolution, ultimately the anarchists were faced with the indignity of Franco's victory.

Interesting as the pamphlet may be, it is perhaps not one of the better introductions to anarchist thought available today. Its style and overall content are very much a product of its time, and whereas it was undoubtedly a valuable intervention at the time of its original publication, some of its premises and language may appear curious to the modern-day reader.

While White is astute in his observation that orthodox Marxism has often made utterly incorrect predictions based on its 'scientific' methodology, his attribution of almost spiritual values to the 'unconditional spontaneity of anarchism' is problematic. Furthermore, the pamphlet lacks any critique of anarcho-syndicalism, its strengths and or its weaknesses, thus offering little but the most basic observations on the historic Spanish anarchist movement. Certain elements of the text may therefore appear foreign to revolutionaries today, for whom more vigorous analysis is usually seen as crucial and whose reliance on spontaneous activity is generally diminished.

This being stated, *The Meaning of Anarchism* is nevertheless worthwhile for those interested in less well-known elements of both anarchist and Irish history. It is also short and not particularly difficult reading. It is certainly recommended to anarchists in Ireland and abroad, if perhaps not to a complete newcomer (although it must be stated that this was the audience for whom it was originally intended). Not only does it offer a unique perspective on general history, but perhaps brings us one small step closer to making the gigantic yet necessary leap in history for anarchists have fought for so long and sacrificed so much.

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