

From Misfit to Anarchist: The impact of the Spanish Civil War on Captain J.R. White

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*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.*¹

Captain J.R. White, 11 November 1936

Introduction

Captain James Robert White (1879-1946), commonly referred to as Jack, appears in many publications as the man who conceived of, and then subsequently trained, the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) in 1913. Born into an upper-class family in Broughshane, County Antrim, White served as an officer in the British Army and received a Distinguished Service Order for his role in the South African (Boer) War, 1899-1902. While later serving as aide-de-camp to his father, the Governor of Gibraltar, White had an epiphany – which he termed an ‘inner revolution’ – and abandoned his privileged upbringing to embark on a voyage of self-discovery, which, in many ways, he would remain on until the day he died. After first travelling and working in Bohemia and Canada, he joined a commune in the Cotswolds which was inspired by the ascetic and pacifist philosophy of the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy. White was not entirely convinced by Tolstoy, however, and left to plot his own course as a champion of the rights of the individual to complete spiritual and personal freedom. Arriving in Dublin during the 1913 Lockout, White readily identified with the workers’ cause, came under the influence of James Connolly, and earned his brief appearance in the history books, from which he then suddenly disappears. *Misfit*, his memoir published in 1930, continues the narrative to 1916 and then frustratingly stops.² Of his subsequent life, scholars have had to rely mainly on snippets of information gleaned from left-wing activists in the 1930s and a few brief, relatively obscure writings by White. It is from these that his second reputation as an icon among Irish anarchists has been built, inspiring numerous short biographies of his life.³

All of these biographers agree that White left Ireland to assist in the anti-fascist struggle in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), and while there became influenced by the ideas of anarchism. After departing Spain for London, he engaged in solidarity work for the Spanish anarchist trade union centre, the CNT (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* – National Confederation of Labour) and its radical wing the FAI (*Federación Anarquista Ibérica* – Iberian Anarchist Federation). The details, however, are vague. None of these biographies mention the dates when he arrived in and departed from Spain, for instance. In the accounts by Alan MacSimóin, Jason Brannigan and Dave Negation, White is presented as being a member of the International Brigades; while in those by Andrew Boyd, Máirtín Ó Catháin, Kevin Doyle and Phil Meyler, he is said to have been a member of a Red Cross ambulance crew sent to Spain.⁴ The only book-length study of White, Leo Keohane’s *Captain Jack White: Imperialism, Anarchism & the Irish Citizen Army* (2014), is strong on White’s life until the early 1920s, adding further detail and analysis to the outline presented in *Misfit*. However, only one of the sixteen chapters of this work is devoted to White’s life between 1932 and his death in 1946;

and in this very little is said about Spain and his solidarity work in Britain thereafter.⁵ Keohane, drawing upon a report in the *Manchester Guardian* and a letter which White wrote in October 1939, recognises that White travelled to Spain in October 1936 as an administrator of a British Medical Unit, although he suggests that 'it is unlikely he was not involved militarily in some way.'⁶ Despite the limited material on Spain, Keohane is particularly noteworthy for being the only biographer to offer a sustained appraisal of White as an anarchist.⁷

This article will begin by discussing the reminiscences of Albert Meltzer, a British anarchist who knew White from his work in the Spanish solidarity campaigns in London in 1937. It will then utilise a range of hitherto neglected primary sources which not only contradict Meltzer's accounts but also further illuminate White's activities during this period, offering an insight into the evolution of his political beliefs. The article concludes with a consideration of the nature and extent of White's conversion to anarchism.

Captain White in Spain

Albert Meltzer's reminiscences of White, detailed in a number of his writings, have been one of the main sources of information for White's experiences in Spain and his life as an anarchist activist thereafter. The most accessible of these is Meltzer's biographical essay on White, titled 'From Loyatism to Anarchism', and written as his introduction to the 1980 reprint of White's pamphlet, *The Meaning of Anarchism*.⁸ Based on the similarity in language and content, plus the accessibility of this pamphlet compared to other sources on White, it is likely to have been the main source for a number of secondary accounts of White's time in Spain, including those by Brannigan, MacSimóin and Negation discussed above.⁹ Meltzer also discussed White in *The Anarchists in London 1935-1955* (1976) and *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels: Sixty Years of Commonplace Life and Anarchist Agitation* (1996).¹⁰ All three accounts present a similar outline of White's role in Spain, if differing slightly in detail. In *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels*, Meltzer claimed that White was a Communist Party sympathiser and 'went to Spain to train and lead the largely Old IRA column in the Connolly section of the International Brigade'.¹¹ According to this account, 'White became totally disillusioned with the Communist Party in Spain, and also with the cause of Irish nationalism [...] He supported the CNT-FAI and the "irresponsibles" – those who would not agree to the compromises the libertarian movement had officially made and were prepared to resist Communist domination by force.'¹² In 'From Loyatism to Anarchism', Meltzer recalled that what White 'could not stomach was the fact that the Irish, like the rest of the International Brigade, were being increasingly manipulated by the Communist Party. He had never accepted the CP; he had just not seen an alternative. Now he saw an alternative.'¹³ Meltzer wrongly labels Frank Ryan – the de facto leader of the Irish in the International Brigades – as 'the CP's top man' when Ryan was not even a member of the party, and alleges that White clashed with Ryan 'who accused White of being a "Trotskyite" and a traitor'. White then 'offered his services to the CNT, relinquishing his International Brigade command.'¹⁴ In *The Anarchists in London*, Meltzer states that White 'took a mixed brigade of Republicans, Socialists and Communists to Spain.' However, Meltzer continues:

[White] shortly became extremely critical of Communist Party tactics in Spain, from the military point of view [...] as well as from the political. When the C.N.T. asked him to disband the Irish Brigade, as a 'thin end of the wedge' against the other International Brigades, which served no ultimately useful purpose and were becoming a loaded propaganda weapon, he did so; and returned to England to speak at meetings on behalf of the Spanish struggle.¹⁵

The problem with Meltzer's accounts is that most of what they allege is false. Meltzer was only 17 years old when he knew White. It appears that half-remembered stories White may have told him in person were conflated decades later with snippets of information on the Irish in the Spanish Civil

War and mixed with a strong dose of wishful thinking. In reality, White's time in Spain was far less dramatic than Meltzer suggests.¹⁶

White was never a member of the International Brigades but was instead the administrator of a planned second medical unit of the British-based Spanish Medical Aid Committee (SMAC), intended for dispatch to Spain.¹⁷ A British Foreign Office report in which he is described as having 'been known to Special Branch for many years' lists him leaving Newhaven on 22 October 1936 bound for Paris.¹⁸ How or why White was appointed to this position is not known. Very soon after his departure for Spain, the unit was cancelled and he was sent back to London. Upon his return, he exchanged some letters with the chairman of the SMAC, Dr H.B. Morgan, which afford some insight into his responsibilities and the possible reasons for the disbandment of the unit. In the first of these, dated 21 December 1936, White claims that the administrator of the first medical unit, Kenneth Sinclair-Loutit, sent a telegram to the Spanish Embassy (he does not state where, but it was likely London) that played a role in the unit's disbandment. According to White, this telegram falsely alleged that he did not have proper authorisation to proceed beyond Barcelona, and that it was part of a conspiracy against him led by communists who wished to use the unit for their own ends. He stated that:

Further light was shed on the matter by a remark Loutit inadvertently made to me when I taxed him with impertinence in sending a wire affecting the whole fate of my unit without reference to me – and incidentally in disobedience of his instructions from the committee to get in touch with me. 'Those passes [to proceed past Barcelona] said Loutit, 'were granted by the anarchists'. That was completely untrue, for they were granted by the Department of War; but Loutit's remark threw light on his motive. An introduction to [Augustin] Souchy of the C.N.T.-F.A.I. had facilitated my getting them so quickly, and in conjunction with what I had seen in Barcelona of the spirit of Loutit and the [Communist] party fraction in the 1st unit, under instruction from the party fraction leader [Ralph] Bates, to sabotage the united front with the Anarchists in Spain, I realised that Loutit's remark was significant. In short the indications gather that Loutit and the Communist party did not wish the 2nd unit to pass Barcelona, because its administrator, myself, was of too independent a nature to toe the party line about sabotaging the Anarchists, and had indeed committed the crime of receiving courtesies and help from them.¹⁹

Furthermore, in this letter White implies his membership of the Communist Party, by claiming that in a meeting in London, 'Ernie Browne, Isobel [*sic*] Browne's husband said to me [...] that the unit "had to be a communist fraction" and foreshadowed my expulsion from the Communist party if I brought anything out. He added that the right place to raise any questions was in the Party.'²⁰ In his reply, Morgan claimed that he could not investigate White's allegations of Communist interference without evidence. He confirmed, however, that on verbal information received, the 'Spanish Authorities' had expressed the opinion that they did not want the unit, 'but naturally did not want to put such a view down on paper.' Furthermore, he stated that had he known of White's implied membership of the Communist Party, he would not have agreed to his appointment as administrator of the unit.²¹ White's following letter confirmed his membership of the party, claiming that he had 'never concealed it' and that 'I have faced and face painful isolation & the hostility of comrades & friends out of a sense of loyalty to a wider unity.'²²

There appears to be some truth in White's allegations. A draft report from the SMAC, dated 4 November 1936, states that a request was made by the Spanish Embassy in Paris for a new medical unit. According to the report, personnel were selected, supplies bought, and the chosen head of the second unit was sent to Alicante to scout for a base. Soon after this, 'verbal intimation' was received from the Spanish Embassy in London, to the effect that they did not want more personnel but only supplies and so the unit was disbanded before it left Paris. The medical supplies were then driven to Barcelona. The report suggests that allegations of looting undertaken by personnel associated with an unrelated Scottish Ambulance Unit 'disturbed the Spanish authorities generally, on the question of British personnel in Spain on ambulance or medical work, and probably affected their subsequent decision on the Second Unit.'²³ By this time, numerous reports had also been sent to London on the

inefficiency of the first unit, based at Grañen in Aragón, and its administrative staff based in Barcelona. Grañen was located near an inactive military front and the idleness, coupled with a mismatch of personalities, led to the unit becoming mired in petty feuds. In one report they were described as being a clique ‘absorbed by their own affairs and managing them badly.’²⁴ According to John McKay Gordon, a former member of the first unit who was reported by police to be “hawking” a story of his experiences around Fleet Street’:

The Spanish Authorities in Catalonia also see through all this incompetency & waste, in refusing to allow another unit permission to go out. the [*sic*] advance party of the 2nd unit under Capt. White was in Barcelona when a cable was received from London to say that the 2nd Unit would not go. all [*sic*] uniforms equipment etc had been ordered & all personel [*sic*] chosen.²⁵

In a later confidential report, prominent members of the first unit, Kenneth Sinclair-Loutit and Aileen Palmer, alleged that:

After its advance-guard and leaders had been seen and had explained their aims, which included a possible transference of the unit to the F.A.I. and the certain desertion of the leader, Captain White, who claimed to be a member of the Irish Party, to the armed forces after 2 months, it was decided to wire London asking them to withhold [*sic*] the second unit. (When slightly drunk, Captain White said, ‘I am frankly using the unit as a stalking-horse, until I find the kind of job to suit me’ [...]) In order not to aggravate anti-foreign feeling, the unit’s cancellation was requested and obtained.²⁶

It is not clear who this report was sent to, though the fact that it was written in English and is located in the files on the International Brigades in Moscow, suggests that it was probably originally sent to the Communist Party of Great Britain in London. This report certainly lends credence to White’s impression regarding Sinclair-Loutit’s role in the cancellation of the second unit.

Unfortunately, the available evidence does not allow for a detailed image of the nature and extent of White’s relationship with the anarchists in Catalonia, nor how that relationship began. However, it is clear that it was quite friendly, as evidenced not only by his introduction to Souchy – one of the leading anarchists internationally – but by the fact that an article by him was published in the CNT’s English-language bulletin on 11 November 1936.²⁷ In it, a clearly-impressed White highlights the ‘revolutionary honour and revolutionary order’ among the Catalan workers, noting particularly, as George Orwell would also do, their refusal to accept tips:

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.²⁸

White presents his readers with a synopsis of the 1916 Easter Rising, ‘now thought of as purely a national one’ in which the central role of the ‘international socialist’ James Connolly is ‘conveniently forgotten’. He suggests that in Catalonia, however, ‘the union of the working class and nation starts off under better auspices than were possible in Ireland.’ Not only was this because ‘the internal socialist reconstruction goes hand in hand with the armed fight against Spanish and international fascism’, but also because they were in ‘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 loses its artificial thunder of condemnation and excommunication.’²⁹

This article is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is one of the few eyewitness accounts by an Irish person of the impact of the social revolution that had broken out in Catalonia after the attempted coup d’état in July 1936. By the time most of the Irish International Brigaders passed through Barcelona in 1937 and 1938, the Catalan state had begun to reassert its control and much of the visible impact of the revolution was absent from the streets.³⁰ Secondly, White’s perspective

in the article is notably different from the Communist Party of which he was a member. From the communists' perspective, it was first necessary to win the war before any thought could be given to revolution. This was a particular bone of contention between the communists on the one hand, and the anarchists and unorthodox Marxists such as the POUM (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* – Workers' Party of Marxist Unification) on the other, who felt that waging war and revolution was a simultaneous process. White's perspective firmly places him in the latter camp. Thirdly, White's evident approval of the stance taken against the Catholic Church is in sharp contrast to that usually given by those Irish sympathetic to the Spanish Republic, who were keen to rationalise and downplay attacks on the Church, stressing instead examples of Catholic support for the Republic.³¹ White, in keeping with his Ulster Protestant heritage and lifelong antipathy to the Catholic Church, takes the opposite approach, going so far as to suggest that:

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.³²

Captain White and the anarchists in Britain

Regardless of what happened with the medical unit, White was back in London by December 1936. He did not stay long, returning in 1938 with his second wife, Noreen (née Shanahan), to the family home in Broughshane, where he would live the remainder of his life until his death of cancer in a Belfast nursing home in 1946. However, during his brief time in Catalonia, it is evident that he experienced a renaissance, and threw himself into political activity upon his arrival in London. From the tone of his letters to Dr Morgan, and the fact that he was writing for the Spanish anarchist press, it is clear that he was intent on breaking with the Communist Party. A British intelligence report on him states that he resigned on 16 January 1937 and 'joined London Anarchist Group.'³³ His new political home consisted of the Anarcho-Syndicalist Union and the CNT defence committee in London where he worked alongside Albert Meltzer and others. In *The Anarchists in London*, Meltzer writes that an anarchist named Alf Rosenbaum, who owned a tailoring workshop in Soho Square, London, organised a gun-running scheme for the CNT and through this they got in touch with White; although how this came about is not mentioned.³⁴ In *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels*, Meltzer claims it was White himself who was behind the scheme.³⁵ Therefore, although Meltzer's account of White's work in London is based on first-hand knowledge, it appears to be as suspect as his account of White's role in Spain.

Through other sources, however, it is clear that White's day-to-day work with the anarchists in Britain consisted of organising and speaking at meetings, sometimes alongside the veteran Russian-American anarchist Emma Goldman, the official ambassador of the CNT in London. Seven letters survive between the two, the first six dated November 1937 and the last dated February 1938.³⁶ Aside from the last letter which discusses scheduling arrangements for a meeting in Liverpool, the others all concern White's suggestion of working alongside the Trotsky Defence Committee in London. White's letters are handwritten and often difficult to read, but the overall tone is clear – he believed good people were to be found among all sorts of audiences. In his letter of 22 November 1937, he refers to F.A. Ridley and George Padmore, two men he believed were going to be at a conference with the Trotsky Defence Committee:

Ridley & Padmore are men for whose minds I have a great respect. I don't think Ridley is a Trotskyist or any other kind of 'ist', and I doubt if Padmore is. I believe we have a chance of a meeting with men of fresh original minds, and the point is not what Trotsky did nearly 20 years ago, but what is the [motive?] [given?] of the Trotskyists – to whom the conference will not be confined – for the revolutionary reorientation now.³⁷

White's conciliatory tone is clear. In the same letter, he then writes of a meeting he has organised in Liverpool for the following month, at which he and a man named Joseph McCabe (presumably another radical) would be joined on the platform by an Orangeman and a member of Baptist College Manchester. White remarks that 'I am in the [vein?] of fusion of discordant elements. New evolution always comes from such fusion. Life gets caught up and encrusted in names and "isms" and the idea has to be rescued [...]'. He believed Goldman was 'making a mistake' in not wishing to attend, although he was clear in addressing her concern from her previous letter that there would be 'No question whatever of "affiliation with Trotsky defence group" any more than of any identification with Trotsky'. He adds that while he does not have the knowledge of Trotsky's past as she does, he 'would not identify myself any more than you would.'³⁸

Emma Goldman replied by sending him a pamphlet called *The Kronstadt Rebellion*, written by her friend and fellow veteran anarchist, Alexander Berkman. If read carefully, she wrote:

you will see that Trotzky in power was capable of precisely the same terror and the same extermination of his political opponents as Stalin is. You suggest that we should not mind what he did in the past. That might be worth considering if Trotzky had in any way changed his attitude of implacable hatred towards the Anarchists and his readiness to exterminate them.

She added that she was glad he did not seek an alignment with the Trotsky Defence Committee, but, in that case, questioned what could be gained by conferring with them.³⁹ In his reply, White stood his ground, stating that:

Kronstadt is a forceful story which I was already fairly familiar with, though your pamphlet has added to my knowledge of detail. But I think you miss the whole point in assuming that Trotsky and Trotsky's misdeeds have anything to do with his followers here, still less with odd freelancers who may be in contact with his followers.⁴⁰

He stressed that F.A. Ridley was a mind with 'originality' and added that 'I would attend a conference in hell, over which Satan presided, if I thought I could come across even the perverted form of an original idea or a deep historical analysis.'⁴¹ Goldman's reply was stern, stating that she did 'not have the time to argue endlessly about the practicability of joining forces between such extreme opposites as Anachism [*sic*] and Marxism.' She argued that every attempt to do so since Bakunin severed an alliance with Marx and Engels had 'proved detrimental to the Anarchists and to our movement.' She added that in light of experiences in Russia, Germany, and Spain, it would be 'sheer suicide to again ally myself with the various political Marxists factions. I am sure my dear to seem sectarian; but I am dealing with facts, not with sentiments.'⁴² Goldman did offer White some support, however, stating that 'It has always been my opinion that the individual is bigger than his creed or theory provided they do not make it a fetish. I am therefore only too willing to meet the man you write about.'⁴³ Unfortunately, this is the extent of their available correspondence.

White's concern towards the unity of the left comes across in both his letters to Dr Morgan and Emma Goldman – whether he is talking of unity between communists and anarchists against fascism in Spain, or between anarchists and Trotskyists in London. He also had the open-mindedness to recognise that the actions and beliefs of the leadership of an organisation need not necessarily reflect those of individual members; a viewpoint perhaps informed by his personal political journey through various organisations. This attitude may have won him some influence amongst anarchist circles in Britain. At one point he was sent to Glasgow to reconcile two competing anarchist groups in the city. Although his arbitration was appreciated, he seems to have been considered a bit naïve regarding the complexities of the movement. White achieved a pyrrhic victory in this particular instance: 'The debate went on till 2 a.m. [*sic*], and an arrangement was made. A new name was thought up for a new group, but as the Captain disappeared in his battered old car and the comrades set out for their respective homes, everyone but the Captain, knew that nothing had changed.'⁴⁴

Captain White's anarchism

Although White's role in Spain was not as grand as it has been made out to be, he could not be blamed for its brevity, nor, at the age of 57, could he be expected to have played a military role when the medical unit was cancelled. Upon his return, he seems to have done what he could to aid the anti-fascist struggle in Spain. What of his politics? Although a member of the Communist Party while in Spain, his article in the anarchist press makes clear that he did not agree wholeheartedly with its politics and methods. The Scottish communist Harry McShane remembered White through his association with the Hunger Marches in Scotland in the 1920s and 1930s as:

Erratic, a bit of an anarchist in some respects, he knew nothing about discipline. He knew nothing about politics either. But it didn't matter. He was sound in so far as what he wanted to do. He wanted a fight, that was the trouble wi' him. He didn't take part in Hunger Marches but he came to support. You couldn't keep White in anything. But he was there, prepared to fight. I liked the man. Jack White was a very fine person.⁴⁵

Anarchism, in its end goal of freely associated communes and in its horizontal organisational forms, seemed to suit his beliefs, appealing directly to his distaste for hierarchy and authority. As has been seen, he was impressed by the Barcelona he passed through in November 1936, controlled mainly by workers organised in the anarcho-syndicalist CNT, which presented anarchism as a lively and viable alternative. White's penchant for action, as related by McShane above, may also have attracted him to anarchism. In the printed version of a speech he gave alongside Emma Goldman in London on 18 January 1937, he spoke of how he was inspired by anarchism as a 'philosophy of action' being 'pre-eminently the philosophy of individual spontaneity' (though he was described by the editor as not being an anarchist). He emphasised how in Germany and Austria, fascism gained victory 'while socialists and democrats reasoned and talked', whereas in Spain, 'At last the philosophy of action of the fascists had met a revolutionary philosophy of action strong and direct enough to master it. In one day fascism was conquered in Barcelona.'⁴⁶ White again emphasised this point in *The Meaning of Anarchism*, which he wrote later that year. Marxism, he declared, had an element of 'fatalism' in that it was dependent on 'external conditions', awaiting the 'growth and class-conscious solidarity' of the proletariat, itself dependent on the 'maturity' and 'over-ripe bursting, of the bourgeois order.' This was in contrast to the 'unconditioned spontaneity of Anarchism', which 'acts in the individual and in small groups to build up social forms, which shall be, as near as possible, embryos of the fully developed Anarchist society.'⁴⁷

Although White spent time in many organisations, his personal beliefs remained remarkably consistent. The following quote from *Misfit*, for instance, bears a striking resemblance to the quotations featured above:

During my agitator days in Glasgow, long after the period I am now describing, there was a revolutionary paper, *The Worker*, with 'Knowledge must always precede action' for its motto. I wrote a series of articles for it on the contrary theme, 'Action must always precede knowledge.' I stand by that yet; but knowledge is the goal and the crown of action, though for the *real* knowledge there is no path but action to win and keep it.⁴⁸

Regardless of this consistency, it is a stretch too far to assign latent tendencies of anarchism to White's thinking prior to his experiences in Spain, as Leo Keohane seems to suggest. According to Keohane, White's disposition throughout his life, especially his questioning of authority and 'isms', suggest that 'His instincts were those of an anarchist and his actions and judgments were consistent with those ideas long before he identified himself as such.'⁴⁹ As one example of this, Keohane cites a speech White gave to the National University in 1913 in which he contrasted what he thought was Catholicism's 'stress on cohesion and the limiting of the liberty of the individual, which was necessary to secure the order of the whole', with Protestantism's 'stress on the liberty of the individual [...] that each might be free by progressive experiment, the essence of which was to make

mistakes, to extend and enrich the common life.⁵⁰ For Keohane, this speech displayed a 'suggestion of anarchist thinking' as White's 'advocacy of liberty, in contrast to the rigidity of control and regulation, allowed for progress even if it only arose from mistakes that were made precisely because of that liberty.'⁵¹

However, there is nothing intrinsically anarchist about White's argument here. It corresponds to an expression of Protestantism, as White meant it to, but can also fit within an interpretation of liberalism, for instance. It is true that for much of his life, White's disposition fitted many of the characteristics of an anarchist; but it also fitted the characteristics of a socialist. The same can be said of his ideas. Keohane suggests that the ideas expressed in White's 1919 pamphlet *The Significance of Sinn Féin*, 'although bearing traces of the influence of Connolly and Marx', also 'include a number of inchoate anarchist theories.'⁵² It is equally the case, however, that these 'anarchist theories' can be read as fitting well within the boundaries of conventional revolutionary socialist thought at this time, albeit often mixed with a substantial spiritual element. White's life and writings suggest that he never sat comfortably with the organisations he became involved with, searching constantly for one that best suited his outlook. Had he encountered an organised expression of anarchism earlier in life, he may have self-identified as an anarchist much sooner than he did. This, however, did not occur. Anarchism is not simply a disposition but is a fully-rounded political philosophy, based upon a critique of contemporary society and an alternative model for organising socio-economic relations. Although his anarchism seems based primarily on instinct rather than theory, it was only after his experiences in Spain that White's writings display an attempt to fit his thinking within the framework of anarchism, signalling on one hand a continuation of his thought, but also a break with what went before. Indeed, in his speech alongside Emma Goldman in January 1937 he admitted that his 'knowledge of theoretic anarchism is as yet very small.'⁵³ Although he may have been deliberately modest here, the word 'yet' suggests that his attempt to grapple with anarchist theory was a recent process, but one which he was now committing to. Fundamentally, although anarchism is arguably compatible with many of White's positions and his membership of a number of organisations, such as the ICA and Republican Congress, it is certainly not compatible with his membership of the Communist Party as it existed in the 1930s.⁵⁴ The position he advanced in the CNT press in opposition to the approved communist line, suggests that by the time he reached Spain, he may have been aware of this. Nevertheless, the fact that he did not make the final break with communism until mid-January 1937 demonstrates a process of thought over a number of months, rather than a sudden realisation upon his arrival in Catalonia that he was an anarchist all along.

Conclusion

Captain White's enduring political aim throughout his activist life, as reflected in the letters and writings outlined above, appears to have been for progressive forces to overcome their organisational and doctrinal differences in order to defeat capitalism and begin a revolution, both material and spiritual. After his return from Spain, he identified the possibility of this as a potential strength of anarchism: 'Anarcho-syndicalism applies energy at the point of production; its human solidarity is cemented by the association of people in common production undiluted by mere groupings of opinion. Affinity of interests is more stable and more powerful than affinity of opinions.'⁵⁵ This quote suggests that White saw room for manoeuvre in anarchism; a flexibility in regard to personal opinion that he perhaps felt was lacking in the more rigid structures of Marxism. His most consistent personal belief, however, and the one that he most often self-identified with, was Christianity. Invited to stand in Donegal as a 'Workers' Republican' for the 1923 election, he instead declared his wish to stand as a 'Christian Communist.'⁵⁶ In the foreword to *Misfit*, he declared, 'I have followed two lines in my life, roughly speaking, the lines of Christ and Lenin.'⁵⁷ In 1937 he described himself as

a 'Christian Anarchist', declaring: 'From that standpoint I define my conception of Christianity as perfect Freedom, which coincides with my conception of Anarchy.'⁵⁸ White's interpretation of Christianity was in sharp contrast to one based upon what he saw as the 'positively anti-Christian' belief in 'self-repression and obedience to external authority' i.e. the Catholic Church.⁵⁹ However, in a letter penned to the leading Irish communist Seán Murray in 1943, he did not mention anarchism at all, but, in describing the 'gulf' that divides the two men, instead self-identified as a 'spiritist':

I am a spirit-ist (the word spiritualist suggests too earmarked a sect) and you are a materialist. You believe that the proletariat, gaining control of the instruments of production, is the vehicle of real progress. I, though I do not deny the inevitability, and even desirability, of the class-struggle, regard the triumph of the proletariat as impotent to achieve real progress & doomed merely to achieve another loop in the vicious spiral of the intensified slavery of man, unless it vies at the essence of real progress. To me the final dialectic is not the class struggle, but the antithesis of love and death, to be resolved in the synthesis of the conscious triumph of love over death.⁶⁰

Anarchism, then – although arguably the *political* belief best suited to his lifelong disposition – was conceivably not the last of the many passing vehicles which White flagged down to help him on the long road to humanity's ultimate transcendence of material constraints and the realisation of a spiritual 'inner revolution'. The brief time that he passed through revolutionary Catalonia was perhaps the closest he ever came to seeing this vision realised.

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Notes

- 1 J.R. White, 'A Rebel in Barcelona: Jack White's First Spanish Impressions', *CNT-AIT Boletín de Información*, No. 15, 11 November 1936. Available to read online at the 'Struggle Site', http://struggle.ws/spain/jw_first.html [accessed 15 May 2015].
- 2 Captain J.R. White, DSO, *Misfit: An Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930). See also Leo Keohane, 'Labour Lives, No. 15: Captain James Robert (Jack) White DSO, 1879-1946', *Saothar: Journal of the Irish Labour History Society*, 38, 2013, pp. 159-162. *Misfit* was republished in 2005 by Livewire Publications, Dublin, as *Misfit: A Revolutionary Life*. This edition, however, is missing the first two chapters of the original. All citations in this article refer to the original. The second edition includes some useful additional articles by White: 'A Rebel in Barcelona: Jack White's First Spanish Impressions' (from *CNT-AIT Boletín de Información*, No. 15, 11 November 1936), pp. 239-241; 'Anarchism – A Philosophy of Action', (from *Spain And The World*, 5 February 1937), pp. 242-245; *The Meaning of Anarchism* (first published as a pamphlet by London Freedom Group, 1937), pp. 246-255; 'The Church: Fascism's Ally. An Interpretation of Christianity' (from *Spain And The World*, 5 March 1937), pp. 256-259. These articles can also be viewed at the 'Flag Blackened' website, although this site is prone to being blocked. See <http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/anarchists/jackwhite.html> [accessed 15 May 2015]. As the articles are short and have been published in numerous places, I do not provide page numbers when quoting from them.
- 3 These include Phil Meyler's 'Misfit 2', published in the 2005 edition of *Misfit*, pp. 233-8, available online at <http://www.revoltagainstplenty.com/index.php/archive/16-archieve-global/122-a-new-publication-on-captain-white.html> [accessed 15 May 2015]; and Jason Brannigan's 'Jack White, from Loyalism to Anarchism', written as an introduction to a reprint of White's *The Meaning of Anarchism* (Belfast: Organise! 1998). My thanks to Jason for sending me a copy of this pamphlet. There have been at least two biographies of White in *Workers Solidarity*, the journal of the Workers Solidarity Movement (WSM). Alan MacSimóin's 'Anarchism's Greatest Hits No. 4: Jack White', in No. 50, Spring 1997, and Dave Negation's 'The Anarchist Views of Captain Jack White', No. 57, Summer 1999, which reviewed the 1998 reprint of *The Meaning of Anarchism*. Kevin Doyle's is the most accurate online account of White's later life, published in 2001. It, along with MacSimóin's and Negation's biographies, are available on the 'Struggle Site' at <http://struggle.ws/anarchists/jackwhite.html> [accessed 15 May 2015]. Máirtín Ó Catháin discusses White in *A Wee Black Booke of Belfast Anarchism (1867-1973)* (Belfast: Organise! 2004) available from the WSM at <http://www.wsm.ie/c/belfast-anarchism-wee-black-booke> [accessed 15 May 2015]. Andrew Boyd's pamphlet, *Jack White: First Commander*

- Irish Citizen Army* (Belfast: Donaldson Archives, 2001), though mostly focused on his earlier life, is an excellent and accessible overview.
- 4 The likely source for the latter is 'A Rebel in Barcelona', where White said he went to Spain as administrator for a British Red Cross unit.
 - 5 Leo Keohane, *Captain Jack White: Imperialism, Anarchism & The Irish Citizen Army* (Sallins: Merrion Press, 2014). The account of his sojourn to Spain and his solidarity work thereafter is found on pages 235-7.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, p. 236. The *Manchester Guardian* report is dated 12 October 1936, and White's letter, dated October 1939, which Keohane describes as a fragment meant for public consumption, is in the possession of his grand-niece, Katy English.
 - 7 Alongside his book, see Keohane's 'Captain Jack White, DSO – Anarchist and Proleptic Poststructuralist', in Sandrine Brisset and Noreen Doody (eds.), *Voicing Dissent: New Perspectives in Irish Criticism* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012), pp. 241-251, which intelligently argues for positioning White – with his skepticism of perceived wisdoms – as an early poststructuralist, highlighting his critique of the 'Grand Narrative' of Catholic nationalism in Ireland. My thanks to Dr Jane Bradbury of Emory University, who procured a copy of this chapter for me.
 - 8 Albert Meltzer, 'Introduction: From Loyalism to Anarchism', in J.R. White, *The Meaning of Anarchism* (Sanday, Orkney: Cienfuegos Press, 1980), pp. i-ix. The first edition of this pamphlet, absent the introduction by Meltzer, was published as J.R. White, *The Meaning of Anarchism: Theory Illuminated by Recent Practice in Spain* (London: London Freedom Group, 1937).
 - 9 It is also the likely source for a biography of White published in October 1981 in the first issue of *Black Star*, the journal of the Ballymena Anarchist Group. A copy of this is available on 'Irish Anarchist History', at <http://irishanarchisthistory.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/blackstar1.pdf> [accessed 15 May 2015].
 - 10 Albert Meltzer, *The Anarchists in London 1935-1955* (Sanday, Orkney: Cienfuegos Press, 1976); Albert Meltzer, *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels: Sixty Years of Commonplace Life and Anarchist Agitation* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK Press, 1996).
 - 11 Albert Meltzer, *I Couldn't Paint*, p. 57. Elsewhere, Meltzer claimed that White was close to the Communist Party but never joined. 'From Loyalism to Anarchism', p. vi.
 - 12 Albert Meltzer, *I Couldn't Paint*, p. 57.
 - 13 Albert Meltzer, 'From Loyalism to Anarchism', p. viii.
 - 14 *Ibid.*
 - 15 Albert Meltzer, *The Anarchists in London*, p. 14.
 - 16 Fearghal McGarry also highlights the inconsistencies in Meltzer's accounts in his *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), p. 71.
 - 17 Throughout the course of my PhD I conducted extensive investigation into archival material on the International Brigades located in Ireland, the UK, the US, Spain, and Russia. Not a single reference to White was uncovered.
 - 18 'Ambulance Unit of Spanish Medical Aid Committee in Spain', 5 January 1937, FO 371/21366/W282/37/41, p. 31, The National Archives (TNA), Kew, London.
 - 19 Letter from J.R. White, 8, Torrington Square, London, WC1, to Dr H.B. Morgan, 4, Aberdare Gardens, Hampstead, London, NW6, 21 December 1936, file MSS.292C/946/2/140, Modern Records Centre (MRC), University of Warwick. The writer Ralph Bates was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and worked with the International Brigades in Spain. This letter is available online at <http://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/compoundobject/collection/scw/id/11372/rec/4> [accessed 15 May 2015].
 - 20 *Ibid.* Isabel Brown was the foremost women's leader of the CPGB at this time, and a founder of the SMAC. Her husband, Ernest, was a full-time worker for the CPGB.
 - 21 Letter from Dr H.B. Morgan to Captain J.R. White, 5 January 1937, file MSS.292C/946/2/138, MRC. Available online at <http://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/compoundobject/collection/scw/id/11362/rec/1> [accessed 15 May 2015].
 - 22 Letter from J.R. White to Dr H.B. Morgan, 7 January 1937, file MSS.292C/946/2/137, MRC. Available online at <http://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/compoundobject/collection/scw/id/11357/rec/5> [accessed 15 May 2015].
 - 23 Draft Report from Spanish Medical Aid Committee, 4 November 1936, file MSS.292/946/41/7, MRC. The piece on the second medical unit is on pages 6-9, while the quote concerning the Scottish Ambulance Unit is on page 4. Available online at <http://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/compoundobject/collection/scw/id/8889/rec/76> [accessed 15 May 2015]. There are numerous letters that discuss the formation and disbandment of the second unit within the file MSS.292/946/41/. Only one of these mentions White. In a letter from Dr Charles Brook, Honorary Secretary of the SMAC to Sir Walter Citrine, Joint Secretary of the National Council of Labour, London, dated 13 November 1936, Brook says, 'I am pleased to inform you that one of the ambulances has been put under the control of Captain White, and from information we received yesterday it would appear that it has gone with a military column from Barcelona to Madrid.' This information is not confirmed in any subsequent letter or report. See MSS.292/946/41/99 (iv), available online at <http://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/compoundobject/collection/scw/id/9220/rec/105> [accessed 15 May 2015].
 - 24 Report by Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland, 'Party Position in Spain', to Comrade Harry Pollitt CPGB [n.d. but Oct/Nov 1936], p.4, Box C, File 7/1, International Brigade Memorial Archive, Marx Memorial Library, London.

- See also Jim Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain: The Spanish Aid Movement in Britain, 1936-1939* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), pp. 55-59, and David Convery, 'Irish participation in medical aid to Republican Spain, 1936-39', *Saothar: Journal of the Irish Labour History Society*, 35, 2010, pp. 37-46.
- 25 McKay's article, dated 23 November 1936, is contained in the file 'Ambulance Unit of Spanish Medical Aid Committee in Spain', 5 January 1937, p. 40, TNA.
- 26 K.S. Loutit and Aileen Palmer, 'Survey of a year's work with the British Medical Unit in Spain', Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History in Moscow – RGASPI) fond. 545, op. 6, d. 88, l. 32. This has recently been made accessible online at 'Documents of the Soviet Era', <http://sovdoc.rusarchives.ru/#showunit&id=153512> [accessed 15 May 2015]. The navigation for this site is in Russian, although the document itself is in English.
- 27 Unfortunately, Souchy's correspondence and most of his papers in the International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam, date from the period after 1942 when he was exiled in Mexico. Given these relations, Meltzer's assertion that White helped to train Spanish militia and 'women in the villages on the way to Saragossa' in the use of firearms is not impossible, though in the absence of corroborating evidence and the unreliability of Meltzer's other claims, it is best not taken at face value. 'From Loyalism to Anarchism', pp. vii-viii. Meltzer does not mention this elsewhere.
- 28 J.R. White, 'A Rebel in Barcelona'; George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (Penguin Books: London, 1962), p. 9.
- 29 J.R. White, 'A Rebel in Barcelona'.
- 30 See Pelai Pagès i Blanch, *War and Revolution in Catalonia, 1936-1939* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013). Peadar O'Donnell gives the most detailed impression of any Irish witness to the effects of the revolution in his *Salud! An Irishman in Spain* (London: Methuen, 1937).
- 31 See Fearghal McGarry, *Irish Politics*, pp. 53-4, 73-6; and David Convery, 'Brigadistas: The History and Memory of Irish Anti-Fascists in the Spanish Civil War (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College Cork, 2012), pp. 188-193.
- 32 J.R. White, 'A Rebel in Barcelona'.
- 33 Card for WHITE, James Robert, in 'The International Brigade Association & Friends of Republican Spain – List of Persons who fought in Spain with the International Brigade. (T.Z)', KV5/131, TNA. The 'London Anarchist Group' is possibly the 'London Freedom Group', who would publish White's *The Meaning of Anarchism* later that year.
- 34 Albert Meltzer, *The Anarchists in London*, pp. 13-14.
- 35 Albert Meltzer, *I Couldn't Paint*, pp. 57-58.
- 36 The letters are as follows: J.R. White, 8, Torrington Square, London, WC1, to Emma Goldman, 20, 22, 26, November 1937; and Emma Goldman, London, to J.R. White, 20, 24, 27 November 1937, 9 February 1938. My thanks to the Emma Goldman Papers Project, Berkeley, University of California, especially Tessa Fisher and Dr Barry Pateman, for providing me with copies of these letters in 2010. The originals are held in File 170 of the Emma Goldman Papers at the IISH and are now accessible online at <http://search.socialhistory.org/Record/ARCH00520/ArchiveContentList> [accessed 15 May 2015]. Emma Goldman Papers hereafter EGP.
- 37 J.R. White to Emma Goldman, 22 November 1937, EGP. George Padmore was born in Trinidad, but was based in London at the same time as White. A former high-ranking communist, he was still a socialist but also a leading Pan-Africanist by the time of White's letter. Francis Ambrose Ridley had set up the Trotskyist-inclined Marxian League in 1930. Both Ridley and the League drew criticism from Trotsky and it folded in 1932. Ridley later joined the Independent Labour Party.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Emma Goldman to J.R. White, 24 November 1937, EGP. Although Goldman spells 'Trotsky' as 'Trotzky', the name has various transliterations to English, so I left it as is.
- 40 J.R. White to Emma Goldman, 26 November 1937, EGP.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Emma Goldman to Captain J. White, 27 November 1937, EGP.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 John Taylor Caldwell, *Come Dungeons Dark: The Life and Times of Guy Alfred, Glasgow Anarchist* (Barr, Ayrshire: Luath Press, 1988), p. 231.
- 45 Harry McShane in Ian MacDougall (ed), *Voices from the Hunger Marches: Personal Recollections by Scottish Hunger Marchers of the 1920s and 1930s. Volume 1* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), p. 16.
- 46 J.R. White, 'Anarchism – A Philosophy of Action.'
- 47 J.R. White, *The Meaning of Anarchism*.
- 48 J.R. White, *Misfit*, p. 83.
- 49 Leo Keohane, *Captain Jack White*, p. 6.
- 50 J.R. White, *Misfit*, p. 207, cited in Leo Keohane, *Captain Jack White*, p. 78.
- 51 Leo Keohane, *Captain Jack White*, p. 78.
- 52 Ibid., p. 195. The pamphlet was published as *The Significance of Sinn Féin: Psychological, Political, and Economic* (Dublin: Martin Lester, 1919).
- 53 J.R. White, 'Anarchism – A Philosophy of Action'.

- 54 On White and Republican Congress, see Patrick Byrne, *The Irish Republican Congress Revisited* (London: Connolly Publications, Ltd., 1994), pp. 15, 33.
- 55 J.R. White, *The Meaning of Anarchism*.
- 56 J.R. White, *Misfit*, pp. 310-12; Keohane, *Captain Jack White*, pp. 214-17.
- 57 J.R. White, *Misfit*, p. 7.
- 58 J.R. White, 'The Church: Fascism's Ally'.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Letter from J.R. White, Whitehall, to Seán Murray, 26 July 1944, D2162/5/5/7, Seán Murray Papers, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast. I am indebted to Dr Seán Byers for this reference.