



BELFAST LIBERTARIAN GROUP POSTERS (1973)

A Wee Black Booke of Belfast Anarchism  
(1867-1973)





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## A Wee Black Booke of Belfast Anarchism (1867-1973)

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## Introduction

Had the tabloids been taken at face value, many would have us believe that 'anarchy' reigned in Belfast on a regular basis over the past thirty to forty years. Unfortunately, that was not the case. However, the equation of anarchy with violence is nothing new and the word continues to be misapplied in almost every context from the chimpanzee house at Belfast Zoo to the streets of Iraq. Partly this is ignorance, partly laziness, and partly deliberate and malicious misapplication by politicians and the media. Of the more cogent explorations of labour history and politics here in the north, the picture is scarcely less misleading. Few writers and historians have given acknowledgement of the existence of anarchists and anarchist movements in Belfast though perfunctory references to small anarchist groups and publications such as the Belfast Anarchist Collective and Black Star have sometimes escaped into mainstream publications over the years. This short introduction does not claim a popular but suppressed mass appeal nor even a historical continuum for anarchism here. We freely acknowledge the marginal status and relative unpopularity of the movement, though people's misconceptions about anarchism have long been a difficulty in popularising it. It nevertheless has attracted a number of extraordinary people over the years from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century, and the message, method and spirit of anarchism has rang out in the streets and halls of Belfast at times of great social radicalism and in periods of inveterate reaction.

This booklet concentrates on the lives of five individuals, only two of whom have achieved any measure of 'fame' on the island of Ireland: Captain Jack White and John McGuffin. Of some interest, is the fact that three of the five are from Ulster Protestant backgrounds and in some cases, from fairly staunch loyalist backgrounds, a heritage that appears no less than the Irish Catholic and republican traditions and probably more so, to have engendered a libertarian spirit of revolt and the challenging of orthodoxies and privilege that gave birth to anarchist ideas. It is also a matter of some pride to the author that one of the five was a Scot who travelled to Ulster and brought his anarchism with him, and who may have been the first to publicly preach its word in Belfast. Unfortunately, none of the individuals recorded here are women, though some reference will be made to Agnes Henry in the text and hopefully in the fullness of time, a number of Belfast women activists will emerge from ongoing research.

This booklet is only meant as a beginning and the focusing on individuals merely a useful way of outlining and highlighting a chronological development of anarchism in Belfast. It does not seek to be either the final or the definitive word and is based on limited source material, which happily will not detract from its usefulness to contemporary anarchists, libertarians, communists, socialists and historians, or indeed, to anyone else interested in the subject.

My thanks are due to Michael Hall, Emmet O'Connor, William Gary Kline, Felix de Mendelssohn, and Andrew Boyd who all supplied materials and knowledge, Fintan Lane and Alan MacSimóin who have done the Irish anarchist groundwork in different ways, and Jason Brannigan, Joey O'Dowd and Al Sneddon, all fellow travellers in anarchist history. I'd also like to thank Anita, Jimmy Jones, and Fraz and Amanda.

This work is dedicated to my friends and comrades in Organise! past and present.

Máirtín Ó Catháin, Derry/Londonderry/Doire, Irlande du Nord.



## CHAPTER ONE

### Anarchism in an Irish and Ulster Context

It was a great pioneer of labourism in the north, Hugh Gemmell, who once exhorted fellow workers here to have two chief loyalties - loyalty to yourself and loyalty to your class. Gemmell was about as far as any old Northern Ireland Labour Party man could be from anarchism, but his note on loyalty is a not inauspicious place to begin a discussion on anarchism in Belfast.

Loyalty to 'king and country' or 'faith and fatherland' has long been the only use of the word in an Irish context, but loyalty to the working class and to a politics free of tribalism and sectarianism has been hard fought for by various sections of the left. Anarchists in the north have been part of that fight since the nineteenth century, though as they were often active in an individual capacity they have rarely been credited with such. Moreover, the very existence of anarchists or those with anarchist sympathies has escaped even the trained eye of labour historians. Some research in recent years by Lane, and in a different way, by MacSimóin has begun to re-address this absence, and work by Jason Brannigan on Captain Jack White has drawn the attention of McGarry to his anarchist politics.<sup>1</sup> Aside from these few studies, however, there is precious little else to go on for those hunting the Belfast anarchists of yesteryear.

\*

The left in Ireland has traditionally been relatively weak. This is a result of several factors but the primacy accorded the national question and the pace and character of industrialisation are probably the key reasons for this historic weakness. Paradoxically perhaps, trade unionism has been quite strong on the island north and south. Interestingly, many of the conditions suitable for anarcho-syndicalism in Catalonia - partial, textile-based industrialisation and a backward and conservative rural economy, though with a vibrant system of what the Marxist historian, Hobsbawm called 'social banditry', were also present in Ireland. The missing factor was a healthy tradition of anti-clericalism, and in fact, both Protestant and Catholic religiosity here has long been the bane of those keen to win people to freedom and socialism.

Despite the obstacles, socialism did take root in Ireland in the 1880s and developed, as in many other parts of northern Europe, into an authoritarian, party-based and power-seeking state socialism after the Second International's endorsement of labour parties. An independent militant stream of trade unionism continued in Ireland and exhibited strong syndicalist ideas and activity. It was at its height in the 1917-23 period and took great heart and inspiration from the French syndicalists and the early example of the Russian Soviets, before its compromise and collapse in the face of conservative Irish republican opposition. It did, nonetheless, contribute to the rise of communism and enliven the entire trade union movement.<sup>2</sup>

The Third International's endorsement of the Second International's stance on the development of labour parties saw communism consigned even more to the margins and under constant attack by Protestant and Catholic confessional statelets north and south. Chasing electoralism the labour movement entrenched further into a moderatist and conservative ideology which would appeal alternatively to the nationalist or unionist voters in the north, or pursued the populist line of clientelist politics in the south. Independent working class activism continued in a number of different groupings and campaigns, which the growing number of post-war Leninist parties attempted to influence or control with greater or lesser success from time to time.<sup>3</sup> A nationalist-inclined republican left emerged occasionally, mainly in the south and found periodic support among a small section in its heartlands, while a unionist-inclined Commonwealth labour and socialist movement in the north tried to woo working class unionist areas over the years.<sup>4</sup>

\*

The emergence of anarchism in Ireland took place in the 1890s primarily out of the growing international popularity of anarchist-communism since the Haymarket Tragedy of 1887, in which a number of Chicago anarchists were framed and executed, giving birth to the celebration of May Day as an International Day of Labour, and the international propaganda efforts of Peter Kropotkin. Irish-born anarchists, however, had been active for a considerable time outside of the country. We may, of course, see much of the spirit of anarchism in the non-hierarchical and direct actionist politics of the proto-trades union 'combinations' in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Ireland, as well as in the many agrarian radical bodies that incorporated the social banditry model. These, however, did not define themselves as anarchist any more than the Cork radical and admirer of John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, William Thompson (1775-1833).<sup>5</sup>

As the Socialist League, founded in 1884, moved towards anarchism in the early 1890s, many of its Irish supporters did likewise, but particularly in Dublin. Derry had responded early to the appearance of the Socialist League and requested copies of its newspaper, the *Commonweal*, but things moved slower elsewhere in the north, and it remains unclear what support there was for the anarchist direction of the League in the 1890s. Belfast remained wedded to a mixture of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), land nationalisation and Christian socialist ideas around this time, while Lurgan had four separate outlets for the sale of the increasingly militantly libertarian *Commonweal*.<sup>6</sup> After the demise of the Belfast Labour Party in the later 1890s, a more radical body, the Belfast Socialist Society was formed and contained a small number of progressive individuals who rejected as overtly nationalistic, attempts by Connollyite republican socialists to win them over. Research into this grouping still needs to be done to see if it contained libertarians or anarchists, but existing evidence notwithstanding a communist breakaway around 1905, does not lead us to believe that it did.<sup>7</sup> The Belfast Socialist Society, or more probably the Belfast Clarion branch, may have brought the Edinburgh anarchist John McAra to Belfast around 1906 or soon after, and by



such means the city was introduced to anarchism. This brief episode came many years after anarchism had been preached and discussed in Dublin at an early Socialist League gathering over a pub on the corner of Foynes Street on Wellington Quay on 14 January 1886. That said, by the time McAra was standing on the Custom House steps in Belfast setting out the anarchist stall, anarchism had long since fell silent in Dublin.<sup>8</sup>

It's not yet known to what extent anarchism garnered supporters in Ireland in the years after the First World War. The rise of militarist nationalism north and south mitigated against the development of a strong socialist current in spite of the great spirit and solidarity of the 1913 Lockout. This was in no small part due to the historic compromise of the Connollyite socialists with the republican movement and the reorientation of labour to the so-called national liberation struggle. As mentioned above, syndicalism did free-wheel out of the welter of nationalist politics between 1917 and 1923, but could not withstand the counter-attacks of the new Free State government and its trade union allies. Despite this, a strong OBU or One Big Union mentality, preserving much of the militant syndicalist idea, lingered on in some parts of the ITGWU and other sectors of the labour movement. Trade union membership did suffer a drop, though strike activity remained fairly constant, but it was with the unemployed, poor relief and Spanish revolution solidarity campaigns that libertarian socialism and anarchism again came to the fore in Ireland.<sup>9</sup>

The primary means by which anarchism emerged in the 1930s was through a conflict between individuals and the socialist-communist milieu in which they were involved, which led them from authoritarian Marxism to libertarian socialism and anarchism. It will take considerable research, however, before all such individuals can be traced, but initial evidence points to at least a few important examples. It was out of the housing struggle and debate with Marxist-Leninists in Belfast in the 1920s and 1930s that 'Slumdom' Jack McMullen developed his anarchism, and a similar process may have brought Val Morahan, the East Belfast Outdoor Relief activist towards libertarian socialism.<sup>10</sup> The experience of Spain was to move Jack White, organiser of the Irish Citizen Army, from what would nowadays be termed a lifestyle anarchism towards class struggle anarchism; while a transformation from Marxist to anarchist by an International Brigade member from Derry, James Campbell, led to his arrest and imprisonment by communists in Barcelona soon after the Stalinist counter-revolution of 1937.<sup>11</sup>

Currently, we have no other information about anarchism in Belfast until the 1960s and the rise of the global radical current and counter-culture of that decade, when interest in anarchist ideas re-surfaced in Ireland. This appears to have begun in the north centred on a group of Queen's University students initially and then their non-student friends, and included John McGuffin, Jackie Crawford, Robin Dunwoody, though not James McCann, who claimed to be a direct actionist of sorts and spent some time in Crumlin Road Gaol for a bombing attempt before his escape in 1971.<sup>12</sup> In Dublin, a similar, though more genuine, 'deed propaganda' type of anarchism emerged out of the Official or 'Stickie' IRA into such groups as 'New Earth' and the

Dublin Anarchist Group, but these groups were clearly under heavy scrutiny from the state and were easily broken up after the Murrys were arrested and imprisoned. The Belfast Anarchist Group seems to have had a more uninterrupted development setting up the 'A' Centre and Just Books, which incorporated Le Café Hideout and the print workshop, in the late '70s. The Just Books Collective remained a feature in Belfast until it closed its doors in the summer of 1994 after sixteen years. It succeeded also in inspiring other collectivist ventures in Belfast in the early '80s and 90's, though like other anarchist collectives in Ireland it suffered from the emigration of activists and the isolation of its political activism.<sup>13</sup> It is unclear to what extent, if any, there is continuity between this group and the group of the same name that McGuffin, Dunwoody, Crawford and others were involved in.

From this brief and sketchy overview, it will hopefully be seen that anarchism had fairly consistently emerged in times of great historical change and upheaval on this island. It has also produced individuals, whatever their merits and failings, who were sincere and dedicated revolutionaries representing, as will be demonstrated, a wide range of libertarian ideas from individualist anarchism to anarcho-syndicalism. Some of them challenge the definition of 'anarchist', and some may barely appear to warrant it, but this is a difficulty for us who admit of anarchism its undogmatic and shifting analysis and ideas.

1. Fintan Lane, *The Origins of Modern Irish Socialism 1881-1896* (Cork, 1997); and Alan MacSimóin, 'History of Anarchism in Ireland', in Workers Solidarity Movement webpage, [http://flag.blackened.net/A/history\\_anr\\_irl.html](http://flag.blackened.net/A/history_anr_irl.html) (1996); and Jason Brannigan, *The Meaning of Anarchism by Captain Jack White* (Belfast, 1998); and Ferghal McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cork, 1999).
2. Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland 1917-23* (Cork, 1988).
3. Mike Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland: the Pursuit of the Workers' Republic since 1916* (Dublin, 1984).
4. Henry Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion: Republicanism and Socialism in Modern Ireland* (London, 1989); and Graham Walker, *The Politics of Frustration: Harry Midgley and the Failure of Labour in Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 1985).
5. John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists* (London, 1978), pp.72-88; and Richard Pankhurst, *William Thompson 1775-1833* (London, 1954).
6. Lane, p.112 and p.160.



7. Lane, pp.221-2; and John W. Boyle, *The Irish Labour Movement in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, 1988), pp.320-1; The second Belfast Socialist Society was founded in 1905 by T.R. Johnson and suffered a breakaway Communist Club in 1908.
8. Lane, p.122.
9. Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824-1960* (Dublin, 1992), pp.116-36.
10. Malachy Gray, 'Reminiscence: A Shop Steward Remembers', in *Saothar*, No.11 (1986), p.114, note 5. Valentine Morahan was sentenced to 6 months in 1933 for sedition and 18 months in 1940 for having a CP manifesto urging class war, though this was reduced to 3 months on appeal. He was expelled from the CP for 'ultra-leftism' after he opposed the Party's stance on war collaboration. Revolutionary Workers' Group and CP leader Tommy Geehan from West Belfast was also to part company with the CP during the war.
11. McGarry, p.175, note 147.
12. Micheál MacUileagóid, *From Fetters to Freedom: The Inside Story of Irish Jailbreaks* (Belfast, 1996), pp.53-4.
13. MacSimóin.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Nineteenth Century

Ireland, more than most countries in nineteenth century Europe, had a sizeable rate of emigration, between 1801 and 1921, for example, it is estimated that the population declined by 8 million.<sup>1</sup> As it had a bearing on almost every aspect of life it necessarily also affected political movements on the island, and contributed significantly to political movements elsewhere in the world where Irish emigrants settled. Lines of political communication became stretched but contact and interaction between emigrants and their native places remained and became quite important in the development of political ideologies. Anarchism was no different in this sense, and most historians of the various anarchist movements have realised increasingly that discussions on French or German or Spanish anarchism have to be set in a global context or that of diasporas that take cognisance of European migration, particularly to the Americas.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter on the nineteenth century is a product of that development and awareness of anarchist diasporas be they Germanic, Francophone, Hispanic or indeed, Anglophone. It is, however, also an acknowledgement that evidence for Belfast-based anarchism in the nineteenth century is utterly absent and we therefore need to look elsewhere for Belfast anarchists and libertarians. Our starting point has been the signposts left by two seminal historians of anarchism: Max Nettlau and Paul Avrich.<sup>3</sup> Both men have in different ways highlighted the importance of diasporic anarchism and sketched out the backgrounds of many anarchists active outside of their places of origin. Many of these individuals were Irish or of Irish descent with not a few having some roots in Ulster. For example, there is more than a possibility that one of the pioneering English anarchists, the London-based shoemaker, James Harragan, born 1849 was the son of an Ulsterman. The name is found most often on the north coast and north-west, and a similar reasoning could lead us to suggest Carl T. Quinn, another nineteenth century 'English' anarchist was in fact from the slightly less exotic location of Tyrone. It might also be possible to place the Tipperary-born Agnes Henry (1850-1910), one of the earliest anarcho-feminists, into a context where she also had one or two Ulster relatives. The Irish-born anarcho-syndicalist Wilf McCartney, who was very active, though in his 60s, during the turbulent 1930s in south London, may be another with roots somewhere in the province. Much more research needs to be done into these nineteenth and early twentieth century English-based anarchists before any such theories (or wild allegations), can be allowed to develop. It does, however, hold interesting possibilities vis-à-vis adding to the wider interactions between anarchism in the various regions of the British Isles, and particularly the impact of the Celtic fringe on the development of British anarchism.<sup>4</sup>

The two 'men of the north' on whom we do have slightly more information, William Bailie of Belfast and Bolton Hall of Armagh, were active chiefly in the US and contributed a considerable amount to the development of anarchism and anarchist ideas on that continent. Both shared a fascination



with the individualist libertarian tradition but wedded this to a firm sense of communalism and social radicalism that eschewed all right-wing and capitalist notions of 'liberty' and their basis in the 'freedom' to exploit and oppress the working class. Nonetheless, this individualist anarchism displayed many of the stoic, libertarian and idiosyncratic traditions of the Ulster Protestant working class, who in the eighteenth century had escaped the 'near slavery' of indentured service to the burgeoning bourgeoisie of the Atlantic coastal towns of America and pushed into the west and south, and the wilderness to live 'free' among the native American Indians as fellow hunter gatherers. As America industrialised in the nineteenth century this longing for a biblical 'Eden' or rural idyll so captured in the works of Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), the poet Walt Whitman (1819-92), and the radical economist, Henry George (1839-97), among a host of others, became a strong theme in American anarchism.

Bolton Hall (1854-1938), son of a Presbyterian minister from Armagh, Rev. John Hall (1829-98), perhaps best typifies this tradition. Hall's father had emigrated to the US in 1867 and became minister of the wealthy Fifth Avenue congregation in New York and helped build the church into the richest in the country, with one of his sons, Thomas, following him into the ministry. Bolton Hall himself became a hardware merchant and married Susie Hurlbut Scott in February 1884 and settled down to the life of a prosperous Manhattan businessman. However, the poverty and injustice surrounding him allied to a strong sense of moral outrage against inequality embedded since infancy, as he had been, in a strictly Calvinist atmosphere, persuaded him to seek out alternatives. Like many of his generation from Belfast to Boston he became a follower of the aforementioned Henry George and his seminal 'back-to-the-land' classic *Progress and Poverty* (1879). Moving from theory to practice he founded the 'Free Acres' commune on a 75-acre wooded site in New Jersey for those like himself, anxious to escape capitalist, authoritarian society and experiment with new modes and libertarian ways of living. As a current member of the community writes, 'there were dozens of experimental communities in the US at the time', and Hall had connections with communities in Stelton, New Jersey, Helicon Hall in Englewood, NJ, Arden, Delaware, Roycroft in Aurora, New York and Fairhope, Alabama. 'These experimental societies were a manifestation of the social ferment before World War 1', and Free Acres 'advocated racial and sexual equality, liberation from Victorian sexual mores and social strictures, and had a special sensitivity towards the environment well before their time'.



Bolton Hall (1854-1938)

As a good personal friend of many contemporary American anarchists and a person committed to putting libertarian ideals into practice, Bolton Hall did not confine himself behind the pastoral township existence of Free Acres. He campaigned continuously on a number of fronts being honorary vice-president of the American Anti-Imperialist League, a man described by Emma Goldman as an 'unconditional libertarian'. His friendship with Goldman lasted many years and he was arrested and imprisoned briefly in 1916 with others for distributing birth control information at an open-air anarchist meeting in New York, at which Emma was speaking. By this time Hall had become a lawyer and offered his services free-of-charge to a number of anarchists over the years, as well as buying Emma Goldman a small farm in upstate New York around 1906. He was a prolific writer and among his works are *Free America* (New York, 1904), *A Little Land and a Living* (NY, 1908), *Life, Love and Peace* (NY, 1909), *Things As They Are* (NY, 1909), *Mastery of Grief* (NY, 1913), *What Tolstoy Taught* (NY, 1913), and *Three Acres and Liberty* (NY, 1918). But Hall was not some dewy-eyed, lifestyle anarcho-sentimentalist uninterested and uninvolved with class struggle. He was an organiser and treasurer of the American Longshoremen's Union and a consistent supporter of industrial struggles and working class militancy in general. Despite this legacy, Hall saw himself and has been remembered as a libertarian and an individualist, though an 'altruistic individualist' is the assessment of Nettlau. Hall's father trained in Belfast and died in Bangor, but there seems little evidence that Hall ever came back home to visit his native Armagh, though there is a slight possibility that he did so in 1923. He ill-fits inclusion perhaps in a discussion of Belfast anarchism, but his importance to American anarchist history (and neglect on this side of the Atlantic), means omitting mention of him would be grossly unfair. In addition, he does bear some interesting resemblance in terms of character and politics with the central concern of this chapter, the Belfastman, William Bailie.



### William Bailie (1867-1957)

'The anarchist tendency is a necessity of progress, a protest against usurpation, privilege, and injustice'.<sup>9</sup>

By the time William Bailie wrote these words in 1906, he had already been an anarchist of some 20 years standing with a number of articles, polemics, letters and campaigns to his name. In addition, he had contacts on two continents and several countries, had played a key role in facilitating anarchist propaganda in England and helped bridge the historic ideological gulf between individualist and communist anarchism in north America.

We have very little information on William Bailie's background, although we know from Avrigh that he was Belfast-born and emigrated as a young man to Manchester, sometime in the mid-1880s. What his occupation was is as yet unclear, but he was quickly drawn to the libertarian socialism of William Morris and joined the Manchester branch of the Socialist League. He appears to have been a conscientious and active member who did a lot of work in the branch, and arranged Kropotkin's lecture in the city in 1890. By then, the Manchester Socialist League was already almost wholly anarchist and this may have partly been due to Bailie's efforts.<sup>10</sup> However, like many other militants of the period a mixture of repression at home and opportunities for revolution on the other side of the Atlantic beckoned and he emigrated to the US in 1891, settling in Boston. It is generally believed that he then made the transfer from anarchist-communist to individualist anarchist, but an examination of Bailie's interests and his American writings reveals him to have developed a unique synthesis of these two streams of anarchist thought.<sup>11</sup>

William Bailie is chiefly known for his biography of the great individualist American anarchist, Josiah Warren (1798-1874), who was a pioneering advocate of mutualism – that system of equality and reciprocity, localised and federated freely into autonomous communities, with an economy based on barter and mutual exchange, so favoured by the 'father of anarchism', Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. This was superseded in many respects by the development of anarchist ideas through the collectivism of Bakunin, the communism of Kropotkin and the syndicalism of Pouget and Rocker. However, during Bailie's time the last of these tendencies was only beginning to emerge, and his chief aim seems to have been to achieve firstly, a re-assessment of Warren as a communist *and* individualist anarchist, and secondly, to demonstrate that the two schools of thought should and could be combined. The first of these tasks was certainly achieved, despite what has been seen as a biased and one-sided biography by Bailie, and Nettlau has been keen to emphasise Warren, 'the father of American anarchism', as a 'communitarian *and* individualist'.<sup>12</sup>

Besides his work as a propagandist, William Bailie participated in other forms of activism. He allied himself with the individualist Benjamin Tucker (1854-1939), and contributed many articles to Tucker's paper, *Liberty* which was published from 1881 to 1908 (see list at end of chapter). Tucker waxed

and waned through much of his individualism, but he was an enthusiastic supporter of striking workers though a stern critic of trade unions which he saw as wishing to create an alternative (worker's) state. This theme of support for militant action by workers and opposition to state socialist trade unionism ran through most individualist analyses of the period and littered the pages of *Liberty*, though the newspaper encouraged debate and featured a deal of anarchist-communist material over the years. Presumably, Bailie, like his comrade Tucker, supported the major strikes of the period such as at Lawrence, Massachusetts and Cripple Creek in 1894, as well as the Homestead, Pullman and Paterson, New Jersey mass actions. Certainly, his background in libertarian socialism and anarchist communism in an industrial setting had made Bailie more aware of and sympathetic to collective action in general, and he most definitely retained and encouraged a belief in broadening and unifying anarchist thought as well as class solidarity.<sup>13</sup> Bailie clearly believed that anarchists should also look at vegetarianism, sexual liberation and women's liberation, for example, and incorporate elements such as these into the anarchist agenda. He himself operated a vegetarian restaurant cooperative for a while with his partner, although most of his life he worked as a basketweaver.<sup>14</sup>

Much more research needs to be done into William Bailie before a proper analysis can be made of his life and politics. Certainly most of it appears to have been lived as an individualist anarchist whose chief concerns were the encroachment of the state into people's lives, the rise of American imperialism and the domineering conservative morality and jingoistic nationalism of the United States' power elites. He did, however, maintain a support for workers in struggle and a realisation that personal freedom was tied inexorably to collective and economic freedom. Like the Glasgow anarchists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he was one of the few anarchist thinkers to make the case for an inseparable link between what most of his contemporaries considered diametrically opposed trends of anarchist thought – the egoist or Stirnerite anarchists and the collectivist and/or communist anarchists. This was because he saw the greatest personal freedom of the egoists encouraged in the freedom of economic equality, and that it would please the egoist to work in cooperation with others as a choice, but also as a logical self-interest in order to establish and maintain his or her liberty. He wrote, 'Egoism implies perfect individualism...mutual aid, cooperation, collective effort, often conduce to egoistic satisfaction, to individual welfare. Perfect individualism therefore implies those kinds of conduct'.<sup>15</sup> While this is far from an exposition of classical revolutionary or even class struggle anarchism, it does show how Bailie had evolved a fairly unique conception of anarchism uniting the various often mutually antagonistic strands and adding important issues on which he felt it was impingent upon anarchists to take a stand. That such things are now taken for granted by many anarchists and anarchist groups was not down to Bailie, but his important work must have made a significant contribution in time and place.



Articles by William Bailie in the newspaper, *Liberty* (1881-1908).

Issue No. 235, page 2; Issue No. 236, page 3; Issue No. 238, page 1; Issue No. 239, page 2; Issue No. 255, page 3; Issue No. 268, page 3; Issue No. 272, page 3; Issue No. 389, page 2; Issue No. 391, page 14; Issue No. 393, page 11;  
 On anarchism – Issue No. 253, page 2;  
 On capitalism – Issue No. 257, page 1 & 3;  
 On collectivism – Issue No. 264, page 1 & 3;  
 On competition – Issue No. 276, page 1;  
 On crime – Issue No. 231, page 2-3;  
 On economics – Issue No. 378, page 4-5;  
 On education – Issue No. 210, page 3-4 and Issue No. 235, page 1;  
 On government – Issue No. 255, page 1; Issue No. 266, page 1 & 3; Issue No. 375, page 3-4;  
 On individualism – Issue No. 256, page 1 and Issue No. 263, page 13;  
 On labour – Issue No. 254, page 1; Issue No. 271, page 1 & 3 and Issue No. 272, page 1;  
 On liberty – Issue No. 258, page 1;  
 On Loria – Issue No. 376, page 3-4;  
 On martyrs – Issue No. 217, page 2-3;  
 On monopoly – Issue No. 368, page 4-5 and Issue No. 371, page 3-4;  
 On property – Issue No. 259, page 1; Issue No. 260, page 1; Issue No. 261, page 1 & 3; and Issue No. 267, page 1;  
 On railroad – Issue No. 369, page 3-4;  
 On sacrifice – Issue No. 227, 3-4;  
 On socialism – Issue No. 265, page 1 & 3;  
 On society – Issue No. 223, page 1-4; Issue No. 253, page 1; Issue No. 264, page 1 & 3;  
 On the state – Issue No. 391, page 26-33;  
 On wages – Issue No. 274, page 1 and Issue No. 279, page 1;  
 On war – Issue No. 392, page 43-50;  
 Clarence Lee Swartz on Bailie – Issue No. 388, page 2 and Issue No. 392, page 50-57;  
 Benjamin Tucker on Bailie – Issue No. 267, page 1; Issue No. 272, page 2-3 and Issue No. 274, page 1.

1. S.J. Connolly (Ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford, 1996), p.170.
2. Carl Levy, *Gramsci and the Italian Anarchists* (London, 2001), is a good example of this expansion of historical research outwith national boundaries.
3. Max Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism* (London, 1996); and Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton, 1998).
4. John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists* (London, 1978), pp.49-50; and International Genealogical Index (IGI) @ [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org), 1881 British Census for 12

Dublin Anarchist Group, but these groups were clearly under heavy scrutiny from the state and were easily broken up after the Murrays were arrested and imprisoned. The Belfast Anarchist Group seems to have had a more uninterrupted development setting up the 'A' Centre and Just Books, which incorporated Le Café Hideout and the print workshop, in the late '70s. The Just Books Collective remained a feature in Belfast until it closed its doors in the summer of 1994 after sixteen years. It succeeded also in inspiring other collectivist ventures in Belfast in the early '80s and 90's, though like other anarchist collectives in Ireland it suffered from the emigration of activists and the isolation of its political activism.<sup>13</sup> It is unclear to what extent, if any, there is continuity between this group and the group of the same name that McGuffin, Dunwoody, Crawford and others were involved in.

From this brief and sketchy overview, it will hopefully be seen that anarchism had fairly consistently emerged in times of great historical change and upheaval on this island. It has also produced individuals, whatever their merits and failings, who were sincere and dedicated revolutionaries representing, as will be demonstrated, a wide range of libertarian ideas from individualist anarchism to anarcho-syndicalism. Some of them challenge the definition of 'anarchist', and some may barely appear to warrant it, but this is a difficulty for us who admit of anarchism its undogmatic and shifting analysis and ideas.

1. Fintan Lane, *The Origins of Modern Irish Socialism 1881-1896* (Cork, 1997); and Alan MacSimóin, 'History of Anarchism in Ireland', in Workers Solidarity Movement webpage, [http://flag.blackened.net/A/history\\_anr\\_irl.html](http://flag.blackened.net/A/history_anr_irl.html) (1996); and Jason Brannigan, *The Meaning of Anarchism by Captain Jack White* (Belfast, 1998); and Ferghal McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cork, 1999).
2. Emmet O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland 1917-23* (Cork, 1988).
3. Mike Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland: the Pursuit of the Workers' Republic since 1916* (Dublin, 1984).
4. Henry Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion: Republicanism and Socialism in Modern Ireland* (London, 1989); and Graham Walker, *The Politics of Frustration: Harry Midgley and the Failure of Labour in Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 1985).
5. John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists* (London, 1978), pp.72-88; and Richard Pankhurst, *William Thompson 1775-1833* (London, 1954).
6. Lane, p.112 and p.160.



## CHAPTER THREE

### The Early Twentieth Century

It was not until the early twentieth century that an anarchist group was established in Belfast. Although we have little information on anarchists elsewhere on the island, it seems entirely possible that this was the first specifically anarchist group north or south. It emerged in a time of rising militancy, though not working class militancy, and when communal relations were especially strained, and proceeded from the propagandist labours of two remarkable Scottish anarchists. One of these individuals, John or 'wee' McAra, as he was also known, is a subject in this chapter. The other person focused upon here is perhaps Ireland's most well-known anarchist, the quixotic Captain Jack White, founder of the worker's militia, the Irish Citizen Army, who made the philosophical journey from Empire loyalist to Republican nationalist to communist and finally to anarchism. Both of these anarchists highlight the irony of politics on this island and the impact of sectarianism, industrialisation and the marginalisation of the left.

The first two decades of the twentieth century were a tumultuous time for the city of Belfast. With a total of 387,000 people by 1911, it was the largest city in Ireland, and had 21% of the island's industrial working class. Despite this, trade unionism was strong only among sections of the skilled working class and industrial militancy all but null and void until the great 1907 dock strike.<sup>1</sup> However, the re-ignition of communal tensions around the thorny topic of home rule over 1911 and into 1912, led to the establishment of paramilitary 'orange and green' sections. These bourgeois nationalisms found common cause in the chance of martyrdom for their respective causes (aped by republicans in 1916 with their 'blood sacrifice'), during the 'Great War' of 1914-18, and sectarianism was ratcheted up by the post-war ambitions of Irish nationalism. Socialist politics only emerged in any substantive way thereafter and were monopolised by the nascent Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP), formed in 1924 and committed to a gradualist if amorphist programme of social reform.

#### John McAra (c.1870-1925)

John McAra was a cooper from the village of Mid-Calder, close to Edinburgh, the city with which he was most associated and to which he moved sometime late in the 1880s.<sup>2</sup> The details of his connection with Belfast are scant and although well-attested, rather lacking in detail. We owe much of what we do know about him to Mat Kavanagh, whose memoir of 'wee McAra' was published in *Freedom*, the London anarchist newspaper, in 1934. According to Kavanagh, McAra was 'one of the quaintest and pluckiest' anarchists in the movement, and a great individual activist and propagandist. A downside of his activity, however, was his tendency never to form or belong to a group, so that after a period of intense work in a particular region or city nothing was left to continue the fight after his departure. This bears resemblance to a number of other independent or non-aligned anarchists who saw their role simply as a propagandist and/or non-prescriptive one. Although

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Nineteenth Century

Ireland, more than most countries in nineteenth century Europe, had a sizeable rate of emigration, between 1801 and 1921, for example, it is estimated that the population declined by 8 million.<sup>1</sup> As it had a bearing on almost every aspect of life it necessarily also affected political movements on the island, and contributed significantly to political movements elsewhere in the world where Irish emigrants settled. Lines of political communication became stretched but contact and interaction between emigrants and their native places remained and became quite important in the development of political ideologies. Anarchism was no different in this sense, and most historians of the various anarchist movements have realised increasingly that discussions on French or German or Spanish anarchism have to be set in a global context or that of diasporas that take cognisance of European migration, particularly to the Americas.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter on the nineteenth century is a product of that development and awareness of anarchist diasporas be they Germanic, Francophone, Hispanic or indeed, Anglophone. It is, however, also an acknowledgement that evidence for Belfast-based anarchism in the nineteenth century is utterly absent and we therefore need to look elsewhere for Belfast anarchists and libertarians. Our starting point has been the signposts left by two seminal historians of anarchism: Max Nettlau and Paul Avrich.<sup>3</sup> Both men have in different ways highlighted the importance of diasporic anarchism and sketched out the backgrounds of many anarchists active outside of their places of origin. Many of these individuals were Irish or of Irish descent with not a few having some roots in Ulster. For example, there is more than a possibility that one of the pioneering English anarchists, the London-based shoemaker, James Harragan, born 1849 was the son of an Ulsterman. The name is found most often on the north coast and north-west, and a similar reasoning could lead us to suggest Carl T. Quinn, another nineteenth century 'English' anarchist was in fact from the slightly less exotic location of Tyrone. It might also be possible to place the Tipperary-born Agnes Henry (1850-1910), one of the earliest anarcho-feminists, into a context where she also had one or two Ulster relatives. The Irish-born anarcho-syndicalist Wilf McCartney, who was very active, though in his 60s, during the turbulent 1930s in south London, may be another with roots somewhere in the province. Much more research needs to be done into these nineteenth and early twentieth century English-based anarchists before any such theories (or wild allegations), can be allowed to develop. It does, however, hold interesting possibilities vis-à-vis adding to the wider interactions between anarchism in the various regions of the British Isles, and particularly the impact of the Celtic fringe on the development of British anarchism.<sup>4</sup>

The two 'men of the north' on whom we do have slightly more information, William Bailie of Belfast and Bolton Hall of Armagh, were active chiefly in the US and contributed a considerable amount to the development of anarchism and anarchist ideas on that continent. Both shared a fascination



successful than most in this part of his propaganda, always selling large quantities of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta and others. Despite the cost to his health of the Belfast sojourn, an anarchist group came out of the work and reaching across the North Channel to Scotland, as many in Ulster had done for centuries, they found ready support for their group. The Glasgow anarchists provided further speakers and publicity in their newspaper, the *Anarchist*, published from 1912 to 1913, and the Belfast comrades appear to have enjoyed a period of growth and stability, something which they themselves attributed to the early labours and example of John McAra, as much as to their Glasgow comrades.<sup>6</sup>

**BELFAST.**

Public opinion in Belfast is so sharply divided on the questions of Home Rule and religion that every advanced movement has a very uphill fight. Since Comrade McAra left Anarchism was never publicly advocated until a month ago, when Comrade Barrett paid us a visit. He addressed two large meetings, at one of which the audience numbered more than a thousand people. He made a very good impression, and since then some of the more advanced Socialists have been inquiring about Anarchist literature. The outlook, therefore, is very promising. We believe that Anarchism will find far more favour with the Irish people than State Socialism. With a cool mile faille to the ANARCHIST we bid adieu. R.M.

Excerpt from *The Anarchist*, 3 May 1912

What became of the Belfast anarchists in the years afterwards or what impact they even had on class struggle and the working class in general as militaristic nationalist chauvinism swept over Ulster, Ireland and Europe is an area deserving of serious attention. The left in Belfast was whittled down into opposing factions typified by the James Connolly-William Walker controversy though with both representing a sterile, nationalistic authoritarian socialist vision devoid of libertarian ideals. Anarchists, where they weren't simply ignored for their tiny numbers, would probably have been seen as beyond the pale by both groups and most other Marxist-inclined writers, thinkers and/or activists of the time. Undoubtedly, however, there were others, not least of whom were probably a good many ordinary workers who were stimulated and inspired by anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism and libertarian, non-hierarchical forms of organising, in struggle and for revolutionary change. If so, John McAra had played an active and important part in that process and deserves a wider recognition for so doing.

### Captain Jack White (1879-1946)



Any study of anarchism anywhere in Ireland would be amiss if it did not include mention of the first organiser of the Irish Citizen Army: republican, communist and then anarchist, Captain Jack White. To date, very little has been written on White's anarchism, which is deserving of more study, as it did not simply arise out of the Spanish revolution of 1936-7, as is often thought. Although White's papers have all been destroyed, there remain a few useful sources in relation to his life and activism, and more may yet be found to draw an accurate picture of White the anarchist.<sup>7</sup>

Jack White's connection, of course, to Belfast is tenuous. He was born at Whitehall, near Broughshane in County Antrim and spent much of his childhood in England before joining the British Army and serving overseas. His inclusion in this study is brief and merited by White's many visits to Belfast and his eventual death in the city in 1946.

The details of Jack White's early life are fairly well documented and highlight his relatively wealthy, landed Protestant upbringing, his uneasy transition to a British Army officer and his first major clash with Roman Catholicism over his marriage to a Gibraltar socialite. The Russian revolutionary uprising of 1905 appears to have had a singular effect on White and he was drawn particularly to Leo Tolstoy the eponymous creator of 'Christian anarchism' in the years after that event.<sup>8</sup> The pacifism of Tolstoy probably appealed to White after his experiences of brutality in the Boer War (though this was the only military escapade with which he was involved). Soon afterwards he resigned his commission and left the Army, working for a while in Bohemia and then Canada (as a lumberjack), before moving to



England and joining the anarchist commune at Whiteways, near Stroud in Gloucestershire. The settlement was founded in 1897 by a Gloucester journalist named Samuel Bracher (and not, as some have suggested, by an 'eccentric mid-European nudist' named Francis Sedlak). The idea was simply to put anarchy into practice in an experimental venture of communal living, free from money and conventional sexual morality. It nonetheless had many moralistic inhabitants – followers of Tolstoy and his writings – who believed in non-violence, vegetarianism, and open-toed sandals, though not always in that order. Later in the 1930s, the settlement operated as a sort of retirement home for anarchist militants and their families, as it had for many years as a holiday resort. These sedate surroundings formed the backdrop to White's embrace of Irish politics around 1912, and he followed the trail-blazing Presbyterian liberalism of Ballymoney's seminal Protestant Home Ruler, J.B. Armour, in his first 'outing' as an advocate of Home Rule in that town in 1913.<sup>10</sup>

Jack White left Whiteways in 1912 or early 1913 for good and after the brief spell in Ulster he moved on to Dublin where he was involved with a small group of progressive intellectuals named the Civic League. The great working class upsurge of the 1913 Lockout was entering a crucial stage and White was an enthusiastic supporter of the Irish Trades and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), and their strike against the capitalist oligarch and Irish nationalist newspaper baron, William Martin Murphy. White spoke and agitated alongside Jim Larkin and 'Big Bill' Haywood of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and initiated the idea and then commanded the concrete organisation of the Irish Citizen Army. This was a worker's militia, originally the ITGWU at arms in a sense, but something which became under White's Sandhurst conditioning, a militaristic corps of worker-soldiers, ripe for discipline and orders and, through James Connolly's influence, pliable in the hands of the military council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in the lead-up to the Easter Rising of 1916.<sup>11</sup>

Convinced as he was of the need for the unification of the labour and national movements, and clashing on this subject with Citizen Army secretary, Seán O'Casey, Jack White moved across to the Irish Volunteers and was dispatched to Derry to train the local corps. This liaison lasted but a short time when he encountered in Derry a strong sectarian antipathy and desire among local Volunteers to fight the rival Ulster Volunteer Force. At the outbreak of war White kitted out a field ambulance and joined an Australian medical force, but lasted only a short time before returning to England. By 1916 he was in south Wales and served three months in prison for trying to organise a strike by miners in opposition to the executions of the leaders of the Easter Rising. In subsequent years, and with a ban on him entering Ireland, White moved more towards a communist position and supported the attempts of the Socialist Party of Ireland to affiliate to the second world congress of the Communist International in Moscow in 1920. Asked to stand on a Worker's Republican ticket in Letterkenny in County Donegal for the 1923 general election, White said he'd stand instead as a 'Christian Communist' and not as a republican which he felt to be a 'morally and politically unsound' position. Unready as it was for such politics, Donegal rejected this response from White

and he moved on to become actively involved with the abortive Irish Worker League, set up by Jim Larkin also in 1923 after the latter returned from the US. This venture was not a political party, embryonic or otherwise, and began to disintegrate in the wake of the Comintern's slackening hope in Larkin. Indeed, the Revolutionary Worker's Group (RWG) emerged in its place in 1930 and won the immediate support of Jack White and a great many ordinary workers. The RWG was yet another communist incarnation, but one that, by its involvement in the unemployed struggle particularly, achieved a heroic if short-lived status in the working class movement.<sup>12</sup>

In 1930, White produced his autobiography. It is a curious and, at times, egotistical account of the man and his political and philosophical development. What comes across most strongly is his fierce independence of thought and action, his ironical self-effacement and his strong Ulster Protestant heritage. What remains behind is largely half a picture, insofar as the culmination of White's political development towards anarcho-syndicalism is not included, coming as it did, in the later 1930s after his visit to revolutionary Spain. Fortunately, however, and thanks to the efforts of Belfast's contemporary anarchists, a re-print of White's pamphlet, *The Meaning of Anarchism*, published in 1937 has left us a strong sense of his anarchist ideas. He wrote, for example, 'to destroy the state, one must not begin by *becoming* the state; for in doing so one becomes automatically its preserver'. Instead, he held, that to abolish the state and class society non-hierarchical, bottom-up self-organisation was the only way forward for the working class, and anarcho-syndicalism in Spain had shown that way. This was because, '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'.<sup>13</sup>

Jack White returned to Belfast in 1931, and as in Dublin nearly twenty years previously, signalled his support for the unemployed demonstrators of East Belfast with a vigorous physical assault (this time minus a hurley stick) on the police who were trying to break up the protestors. White was in East Belfast in solidarity with the unemployed and as a member of the RWG, and spent a month in prison for his defence of the street protest. More damaging was the exclusion order served on White as he emerged from Crumlin Road gaol, and which effectively put an end to his political activity north of the border.<sup>14</sup>

Apparently, Jack White went to Spain in 1936 with a British Red Cross unit, though anarchist comrades who actually knew and remember him, state fairly categorically he had some connection with the famed 'Connolly Column' section of the International Brigades, which sailed from Ireland to fight fascism in 1936. They further state that there was a clash then between Frank Ryan, a leading Connolly Column member, and White. The left republican-leaning academic Ferghal McGarry is quite critical of this view and the memory of White's contemporary, Albert Meltzer in particular, in relation to it. He further feels Meltzer is too harsh on Frank Ryan for collaborating with the Nazis soon after the Francoist victory in Spain.<sup>15</sup> Without an examination of the papers of the 'Freedom' Group with which White was connected in the years leading up



to his death, it is difficult to be definitive about how White went to Spain and what dealings he had with the 'Connolly Column'. We do know he became thoroughly disenchanted with Stalinist communism and aligned himself firmly with the Spanish anarchists of the CNT-FAI, and on returning to London set up an arms smuggling enterprise to the anarchists via Czechoslovakia and Germany. Meltzer, who himself had a family connection with Ballymena, helped out in this enterprise by 'invoice typing and listening to White endlessly relating the crimes of the Catholic Church'.<sup>16</sup> The channel was closed down, however, when the Germans alerted London about this surreptitious breach of the Non-Intervention Pact, and the Captain confined himself to activism with the pre-war Freedom Group, arbitration amongst the divided anarchists of Glasgow, and the production of an Irish anarchist labour history survey with the Liverpool Irish anarchist, Mat Kavanagh. Finally, in 1940, it was only in illness and death that exile ended for Jack White and after a brief period in a Belfast nursing home, he died and was buried in the graveyard adjoining Broughshane First Presbyterian Church.<sup>17</sup>

Jack White's journey towards anarchism began many years before his embrace of nationalism or communism, and although his conversion to anarcho-syndicalism came later, his libertarian ideas were the defining political motif of his life. He had, since boyhood, already carried a total detestation of the villainous and shameless tyrannical hypocrisy and doublespeak of the Roman Catholic Church, as a set of ideas completely without rancour or bigotry towards individual Catholics. His subsequent experiences of the de-humanising authoritarianism and barbarity of the Army and war set him on a path that never thereafter veered too far from a solid libertarian socialism.

1. Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824-1960* (Dublin, 1992), p.35.
2. New Register House, Registrar General's Office for Scotland, Census of 1891, District of St. George, Edinburgh, 161 Fountain Bridge, Edinburgh, 685/01/073/000/016.
3. *Freedom*, May 1934.
4. Florence Boos, 'William Morris' Socialist Diary, edited, annotated and with an introduction and biographical notes', in *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 13 (Spring 1982), p.70; and *Freedom*, May 1934; and John Taylor Caldwell, *Come Dungeons Dark* (Barr, 1988), p.107.
5. *Freedom*, May 1934; and Caldwell, p.106; and Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), Home Affairs, Royal Ulster Constabulary, Special Branch Files, report dated 30 April 1930, HA/30/1/545, reference to 'McArrow', sentenced to 3 months for seditious speech, by Loftus Johnson, member of the Belfast Revolutionary Workers Group; and O'Connor, pp.62-3.

6. *Freedom*, May 1934; and Haia Shpayer, 'British Anarchism, 1881-1914: Reality and Appearance', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London (1981), p.106.
7. Jason Brannigan, 'Jack White: From Loyatism to Anarchism', introduction to Jack White, *The Meaning of Anarchism* (Belfast, 1998); Alan MacSimóin, 'Jack White', [http://struggle.ws/ws/ws50\\_jack.html](http://struggle.ws/ws/ws50_jack.html); and Ferghal McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cork, 1999), are the only three works to look at White relative to his anarchism, although Kevin Doyle's work also deserves mention, see <http://struggle.ws/anarchists/jackwhite.html>. His RUC Special Branch file (looked at by McGarry) may be of use along with other Branch files and documents in the Spanish Interior Ministry's archives.
8. Andrew Boyd, *Jack White, First Commander, Irish Citizen Army* (Belfast, 2001), p.9.
9. John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists* (London, 1978), pp.228-9. Boyd makes the mistaken assertion about Sedlak, possibly because White's first letter from Whiteway had 'care of Francis Sedlak' written on it.
10. Boyd, pp.10-12.
11. Boyd, pp.15-26; and Brannigan, p.1; and O'Connor, pp.87-93.
12. Boyd, pp.27-38; and Jack White, *Misfit* (London, 1930), pp.310-12; and O'Connor, pp.122-26.
13. White, *Misfit*; and Brannigan, pp.3-4.
14. Boyd, pp.39-40; and Mike Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland: the Pursuit of the Workers' Republic since 1916* (Dublin, 1984), p.127.
15. McGarry, p.71 and p.271, note 59; and Albert Meltzer, *The Anarchists in London, 1935-1955* (Orkney, 1976), p.14; and Albert Meltzer, *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels* (London, 1996), p.57.
16. Meltzer, *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels*, p.58; and Brannigan, p.2; and Boyd, pp.41-2.
17. Caldwell, p.232.



rarely with more than a few members present, but the criticism of McGuffin persuaded 4 members of the Group to leave and form the Belfast Libertarian Group, a move that had been coming for some time. This led to the collapse of the BAG, and none of McGuffin's supporters sought of resurrect it thereafter.<sup>22</sup> The degeneration of a potentially revolutionary situation and the sectarian entrenchment that had been increasingly apparent since the start of the 1970s, contributed in no small measure to this anarchist split. It had arisen out of the need for anarchists to provide an alternative (class) analysis to the nationalist and sectarian ones gaining in potency, and as a result of the theoretical support extended to republicans by some anarchists, rather than as an attempt to deal with practical anarchist support for the IRA's 'armed struggle'.

There was, on the other hand, one particular incident early in the Troubles occasionally cited as evidence of direct anarchist violence complicit with or sympathetic to the 'war' of republicans. The involuntary participation of at least one genuine anarchist and one who merely claimed for himself the label 'anarchist', has drawn the criticism of McGuffin himself, but remains an episode which needs clarification.

The story of a bomb plot against Queen's University hatched by a German anarchist, a New York photographer, a Belfast journalist and an unemployed salesman in the bar of the Wellington Park Hotel was, from the start, an unlikely tale. It did, however, prove a salacious one for a continually salivating media hungry for even a glimpse of the mad anarchist bomber bogeymen as a new angle on, or alternative to the grinding predictability of nationalist and sectarian violence. Step up James Joseph McCann, with a petty criminal past in Belfast and England, a slightly unhinged quality and a talent for invention. As a self-proclaimed 'anarchist', McCann had been hanging around the revolutionary tourist set based in the Wellington Park, close to Queen's from around about 1970. This had included, most famously, Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman of the American Yippies (Youth International Party), and the singer and poet, Phil Ochs. McGuffin and his comrades had also spent some time in the august company of these 'friends of the revolution', as McGuffin called them, and also knew McCann, of who he had a very poor opinion.<sup>23</sup> The basic bones of the story are that McCann in the company of Felix de Mendelssohn, Joseph Stevens and Peter McCartan, all working in one way or another as journalists, met him at Queen's on the promise of an exclusive, or perhaps after some drinks and goading from McCann. They were then treated to the spectacle of a Molotov cocktail attack on Queen's Common Room, a chase by a passing plainclothes RUC patrol and an armed standoff, before McCann surrendered his sawn-off shotgun and the unlikely quartet were arrested and remanded to Crumlin Road gaol. After some pre-trial theatrics and four months inside, McCann, who spent his term informing his Provo cellmate that the jail hadn't been built which could hold him, he broke out of the prison by sawing through the cell bars. The escape was the first since December 1960 and gained McCann some, largely self-generated, notoriety as the 'green' or 'shamrock pimpernel' and the original 'border fox'. McCann's subsequent escapades are well-documented by dope dealer Howard Marks in his autobiography, *Mr. Nice*, but basically he took up

the main currents of anarchist thought and action (both in the '30s and the '60s), activists here had to develop their own, often idiosyncratic, modes of anarchism. Occasionally, contacts were made with anarchists elsewhere in Europe but mostly, and with little knowledge of or interaction with earlier generations of northern anarchists, the assembling of an anarchist critique was a lonely affair. However, as stated above, this did not make our anarchist voices of the later twentieth century loners, they were in every sense fully part of the wider movements for social and economic revolutionary change.

### Jack McMullen (1874-)

Ten years after the Belfast anarchists had rippled the waters of the labour movement, another figure emerged with the anarchist ideal emblazoned on his fiery and indomitable personality as much as his political activity. 'Slumdom' Jack McMullen was born, in his own words, 'in this generous and hyper loyal city' in 1874 or 1875, and his life-long hatred for landlords and slum housing from which he earned his nickname was nurtured in infancy when a landlord demanded extra rent from his mother for the inclusion of his cot, counted presumably as a second bed.<sup>3</sup> Thereafter, Slumdom became a virulent opponent of the atrocious housing conditions that prevailed in post-war Belfast, conditions that for some time surpassed the cities of Glasgow, Dublin and Liverpool for overcrowding and sheer degradation. He became a socialist and joined the Belfast Independent Labour Party (ILP) branch, even being selected as a candidate in the January 1926 Corporation vacancy in the Court Ward of the city.<sup>4</sup> As in many cities, however, the ILP contained a wide range of political opinions and shades of socialism, and many of these realigned themselves after the party disaffiliated from the British Labour Party in 1926, forming themselves into the Socialist Party of Northern Ireland (SPNI). In 1930, the communists had founded the Revolutionary Workers Group organisation, but the libertarian socialist spirit in parts of the ILP, which carried over into the SPNI probably appealed more to McMullen. He appears to have drifted from membership of any particular party or grouping after the ILP disintegrated, but remained an active independent speaker and agitator with 'anarchist leanings', as Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union shop steward, Malachy Gray remembered.<sup>5</sup> McMullen was to be found holding forth in Corporation Square where the ILP had held its meetings, and regularly every Sunday afternoon on the Custom House steps, where 'wee McAra' had first preached the anarchist word. It was at the latter location in 1934 that Malachy Gray first heard him and was drawn into the labour movement as a result of McMullen's advice that 'you will live in bug incubators for the rest of your lives unless you stand up and fight for decent homes and jobs'.<sup>6</sup>

Slumdom appears to have been a fiercely independent character whose speeches could offend the sensibilities of his hearers as well as enliven the hearts of those tired listening to the hackneyed exhortations of the labour establishment. Northern Ireland labour historian, Andrew Boyd, remembers some shipyard workers who found Slumdom's analogies quite 'lewd' and offensive. For example, his Sunday afternoon speeches once proclaimed that some men would be more comfortable in bed with a razor



that even reserved for Irish republicans, even though the violence employed by the anarchists was largely discriminate and accidental in a period when both loyalists and republicans, as well as the British state, were engaged in very deliberate, calculated and frequently indiscriminate acts of violence.<sup>28</sup>

After his internment, John McGuffin appears to have concentrated on writing for a time and it was in this area perhaps that he really excelled. His exposes of internment without trial and state-sponsored torture and systematic human rights abuses catalogued expertly and with great wit in *Internment* (1973) and *The Guinea Pigs* (1974) have stood the test of time. They are classic anti-state critiques written clearly from an unabashed libertarian perspective, and are among the very best books written about the north in the last thirty to thirty-five years. It was also at this time that McGuffin moved from an anti-statist anarchist position more towards republicanism. His nephew, the journalist Paddy McGuffin, records this transformation in McGuffin and his comrades from 'pacifist beliefs' as and towards becoming 'fully-fledged members of the Republican movement'. As a contemporary of McGuffin's remembered, a number of anarchists mostly from 'nationalist areas' retreated into the wider republican family after the Falls Curfew of July 1970 in solidarity with the nascent armed campaign and/or response of the Provisional IRA. Some even went on to join Sinn Féin convinced in some way that the republicans were genuinely anti-statist and libertarian revolutionaries.<sup>29</sup> McGuffin himself became a columnist for the Provisional movement's newspaper, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* writing under the pseudonym, 'the Brigadier' from 1974 to 1981, although his acerbic pen was not uncritical of republicans themselves on occasion. He also sat on an international committee investigating the deaths in custody of Red Army Faction members in Germany, and strengthened a long-standing friendship with various left-leaning German radicals, communists and sympathisers of Irish republicanism, while taking time out in 1978 to write the brilliant *In Praise of Poteen*, celebrating the ingenuity, talent and anti-authoritarian spirit of the poteen-makers as well as their historic concoctions. McGuffin's later travails saw him re-locate to San Francisco where he became a criminal defence and human rights lawyer, before returning with his German partner and comrade, Christiane Kuhn, to settle in Derry in 1998. McGuffin's political associations and activity then centred around his internet-based 'Dispatches', reporting and critiquing various political developments in the north and far beyond it. He was a supporter of the Garvaghy Road Residents in their campaign against Orange marches and travelled to Portadown to take part in protests there during the marching season. He also supported the calls of the Foyle Ethical Investments Campaign (FEIC) for the removal of defence industry giant, Raytheon, from Derry, and found time to write for the *Derry News* mainly in a satirical and at times libellous manner. He also produced another two valuable books, one a largely autobiographical collection of apocryphal tales and the other a biography, with Joe Mulheron, of the Derry IRA man, seafarer and general adventurer, Captain Charles 'Nomad' McGuinness.<sup>30</sup> In all, McGuffin produced nine books, a number of which were solely in German, he finding few publishers in Britain or Ireland willing to print the works of a man described by many as 'an intellectual hooligan'.

his political philosophy, activism and independent critical mind. Most of McMullen's contemporaries are now dead and it will require some intensive research to establish his political convictions outside of a general independent anarchist-leaning leftism, as well as delving further into his activism.

### John McGuffin (1942-2002)

There is an amusing and completely unbelievable story related at the time of John McGuffin's funeral of his hosting the well-known American 'Yippie' Jerry Rubin when he visited the north in the late 1960s. Passing through County Down on their way to Dublin through districts swathed in the Down Gaelic football colours of red and black, McGuffin informed his guest of how the whole area was in the grip of anarchist militants. Roadside signs emblazoned with 'UP DOWN' further convinced Rubin of the inspired libertarian revolutionary ethic sweeping south-east Ulster.<sup>31</sup> It was, of course, a time of great social and political ferment and this may have made McGuffin's legendary sophistry all the more believable. Like Rubin, McGuffin was a veteran of that ferment and an anarchist of a very particular colour. Throughout his life, he made no secret of his qualified support for Irish republicanism and centred his politics around issues relative to the state and its powers. Despite his early years in People's Democracy (PD) and its libertarian socialist focus on issues such as jobs and housing, McGuffin showed no real interest in workplace or industrial struggles and although recognised widely as an anarchist, he along with a number of others moved ideologically further away from anarchism as the 1970s progressed. This was part of a wider trend as sectarianism entrenched, violence increased, and genuinely radical politics withered under the onslaughts of the state and paramilitaries.

John Niall McGuffin was born into a relatively wealthy middle class Presbyterian family in 1942. Despite this, he had a degree or taint of socialism in his background through his uncle, the MP for Shankill ward from 1917 to 1921 and then for north Belfast, the Freemason and first speaker of the Stormont Parliament, Sam McGuffin, a 'Labour Unionist'. He was sent to the exclusive Campbell College in Belfast and proceeded from there to Queen's University where he received honours in history and psychology and then took up a lecturer's post at Belfast Technical College. This throws up a second contradiction in terms of McGuffin's hostility towards academia and a possible career therein despite his great mind, his academic prowess, and the quality of his written, analytical and oratorical skills. He was never able to quite overcome his intellectual rigour despite continued attempts at pastiche and ridiculous hyperbole, at which he was no less adept, and McGuffin's writings are often as academic and thorough as any available. Perhaps this is ironic given McGuffin's distaste for academia or perhaps that distaste is merely reserved for the much vaunted and completely illusory 'impartiality' of the universities. Either way, his early anti-intellectualism exhibited a healthy disdain for such institutions and a recognition of their role in the sustenance of class privilege and the power of ruling elites common to many anarchists.<sup>32</sup>



It was, however, within the confines of Queen's University that McGuffin first came to prominence as one of the leading militants of People's Democracy (PD), which emerged from among the student body after a frustrated civil rights march and short sit-down protest in Linenhall Street on 9 October 1969. He had already been chairman of the Queen's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) from 1964-65 and a member of the University Labour Group before joining PD. The group contained a significant number of very articulate, and in some senses, very naïve radical students from broadly Trotskyist, Left Republican and Anarchist backgrounds, but from the outset was a markedly non-sectarian, internationalist and libertarian civil rights movement. It was open to all and had no written constitution, its main aims being (1) One man, one vote; (2) Fair (electoral) boundaries; (3) Houses on need; (4) Jobs on merit; (5) Free speech; and (6) Repeal of the Special Powers Act. Although the body later became a more rigid organisation with a Trotskyist programme, libertarians and anarchists, such as McGuffin, argued strongly for the open and accountable democratic principles on which the group was formed, and which had attracted him to it initially, to be maintained.<sup>13</sup> This, however, suffered its first major blow after just a few months when an earlier, albeit conservative, majority decision was taken to cancel the planned 'long march' from Belfast to Derry but was subsequently overturned by a minority of Young Socialists, including Michael Farrell and Cyril Toman. They held a meeting at Queen's after most of the students had left for holidays in December 1968, unsatisfied with Prime Minister Terence O'Neill's assurances of addressing the grievances of the civil rights movement, and vowing to carry on with the march where PD had failed. McGuffin did not agree with this tact of usurping the broad democratic will of the students and PD, although he decided in the end to take part while still arguing his politics.<sup>14</sup> It was during the 'long march' and savage attack on the demonstrators at Burntollet by police and Paisleyites, that McGuffin was written into history for having an anarchist banner on the march. Much mileage has been made out of the story that McGuffin allegedly carried the banner on his own at times throughout the march, though it is something confirmed only in some memoirs of the events and finds no verification in the major studies of the protest and period. What actually happened, according to a Belfast Anarchist Group member, was that McGuffin phoned him to bring the banner for the last stage of the march into Derry, and after the Burntollet ambush, these members joined with McGuffin and marched with the banner into Derry. However, at Irish Street in the Waterside the march was attacked by another group of Paisleyites. A Belfast Anarchist veteran takes up the story, 'I remember sticking my pole into the face of one attacker before I was punched and kicked and the banner snatched away. The attackers must have had lighter fuel with them for only a few moments later I looked back to see the banner well alight'.<sup>15</sup> It's not in doubt, of course, that McGuffin did indeed carry the banner, but not all the way from Belfast and certainly not on his own as a demonstration of his political righteousness. Such apocryphal tales may entertain but they rarely enlighten, and they permit those who are not anarchists (though they may even be patronisingly sympathetic), to portray anarchism as a political eccentricity – the last refuge for the impractical and the whimsical on the left – of those convinced but unable to convince.

McGuffin's embrace of anarchism began in 1967 and he, with Robin Dunwoody and others, was a founder member of the Belfast Anarchist Group (BAG). However, McGuffin was not present for the Group's first meeting on 5 October 1968. He had gone off to Derry in company with a 40-strong group of Young Socialists from Belfast for the ill-fated civil rights march in Duke Street, which had been banned and was brutally beaten and broken up by the RUC, and therefore missed the initial meeting in a candlelit room above a restaurant in Upper Arthur Street. At these early meetings, a member named Roland Carter brought along anarchist books and pamphlets possibly supplied from Freedom Press in London. The difficulty, however, was that events were moving faster than could be anticipated and 'the need for new members to have space to grow into a proper understanding of anarchism was pushed into the background by the need to respond to the rapidly-developing situation on the ground'. Nevertheless, the BAG, with some 20 or so members had displayed some good early successes. Up to 200 copies of the London Anarchist paper, *Freedom* were sold in Belfast at one stage, and the Group, mostly composed of young unemployed men and women, and some former students, was meeting regularly in the city and then, at a later stage, at Queen's as student activism took off. Some members were still at school and through an interest in the Free Schools movement in England, got copies of a leaflet on the radical anti-authoritarian campaign, which they distributed in a number of Belfast schools. This led to some expulsions and a front-page article in the *Belfast News Letter*, which carried a copy of the leaflet in question and a photograph of a picket on one of the schools where disciplinary action had been taken.<sup>16</sup>



People's Democracy march with Belfast Anarchist Group banner, January 1969

By March 1969, McGuffin was in Manchester as a speaker to the Revolutionary Socialist Students Federation (RSSF), fresh from the Burntollet march and seems also to have appraised anarchists in England of circumstances in the north and events to come. He was a principal organiser for the next major PD march from Belfast to Dublin in April 1969, which was attended by many English socialists and some 40 anarchists. Numerous



anarchist flags were carried on the march and some women members of the BAG made a number of anarchist neck-scarves, 'a typically sexist job allocation', as one BAG member recalled. This splash of anarchist colour, however, even led some journalists to label it an anarchist march. The march was plagued by difficulties from the start, beginning with a violent confrontation in Lurgan (where it actually set off from after problems in Belfast), and ending with divisions between PD and some of the southern left-wingers. McGuffin and BAG members decided at one point if they could get the numbers they would disrupt the Irish state commemoration of Easter 1916, using the opportunity to attack both states, though the tiredness of the marchers and the internal dissensions prevented this. There was also a minor clash with republicans over their insistence people march in military formation, though PD and the anarchists both resisted this. Possibly on this march or another about this time, one Belfast anarchist remembers some marchers even sang the republican anthem, 'take it down from the mast', to which the anarchists responded (to the tune of the 'Red Flag') – 'The people's flag is red and black, and you can fuck your Union Jack; When you're out of work and on the dole, you can stick the Tricolour up your hole!' Some leading PD members quickly suggested this anarchist sing-a-long be abandoned. McGuffin, nonetheless, felt the march to have been a success even if this was only inasmuch as it further raised international awareness of the struggle for civil rights.<sup>17</sup>

Soon after the Dublin march PD talk of electioneering caused much argument between them and McGuffin, and he was cast again in the role of the main opposition to such reformism. He took a lead in opposing Bernadette Devlin's electoral bid, as an anarchist, but also partly because PD did not officially back her and because she was standing, in his words, as the 'pan-papist candidate'. The two were lifelong friends but the tension between her and McGuffin (as between McGuffin and many people), never entirely dissipated, even in the days before his death in 2002.<sup>18</sup>

When the north erupted again in August '69, McGuffin was in far-flung Morocco and unable to return until September. When he did so PD was advancing steadily towards a more authoritarian structure and an expressly Connollyite aim, though McGuffin still contributed to the *Free Citizen* newspaper of the group and Belfast anarchists played their part in selling it in the city. Radio Free Belfast was broadcasting regularly and McGuffin was heavily involved in the running of it behind the barricades in West Belfast. He also continued to argue for libertarian ideas and methods within PD and outside of it, though difficulties continued to arise in relation to breaking out of the student ghetto and addressing and supporting workers. McGuffin conceded this in an interview in the early 1970s, saying, 'To a certain extent we would accept that we haven't had an industrial policy. Our best policy would be to make shop-floor contacts but we can't succeed there as long as the sectarian divide remains'. This was despite leafleting forays at factories in and around Belfast, such as Courtaulds, ICI and Rolls Royce.<sup>19</sup>

John McGuffin was picked up in the first internment scoop on 9 August 1971, and held until 14 September that year, initially at Girdwood Army

Barracks and then Belfast's Crumlin Road gaol. His internment was to have a profound impact on his politics and his later writings and may have been akin to the transformation it inspired in fellow PDer Michael Farrell. Arguably, both men left their fellow internees with a more pronounced sympathy for Irish republicanism, scepticism about the tactics of the civil rights movement in the face of mounting state repression, and a stronger sense of anti-unionism. Within a few months both men had also come to support the Northern Resistance Movement (NRM), founded as a rival to the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, and which developed what Arthur has called a 'curious symbiotic relationship' with PD and the Provisional IRA.<sup>20</sup> It was within PD, however, that McGuffin maintained what he called 'an anarchist wing' with his two closest comrades, Robin Dunwoody and Jackie Crawford, a former student of McGuffin's at Belfast Tech who was also interned briefly. However, at a time when PD's *Free Citizen* newspaper became the more pointed, perhaps more cynical, *Unfree Citizen* and expressed an increasing level of equivocation over IRA atrocities such as on 'Bloody Friday' in Belfast on 21 July 1972 when 9 people were killed and 130 injured in a city centre bombing spree, McGuffin was among the few (possibly the only PD member) to speak out publicly. He wrote in *Internment*, 'Twenty-two bombs in the heart of a crowded city in broad daylight are bound to kill people no matter what warnings are given, and the Provisional IRA must bear the full responsibilities for these murders'.<sup>21</sup> It should also be noted that while McGuffin and his comrades were drawing closer politically to one side of the widening sectarian divide, and he personally was discovering an empathy and admiration for many individual Provisionals, they do not appear to have engaged actively in the armed campaign of the Provos or in solidarity with that campaign.

Since about 1971, the BAG had been meeting irregularly, and some members had even drifted away or been subsumed into PD activism. Differences of opinion with regard to the armed campaign of the IRA had also started to emerge. The break finally came in 1973, when police in London alleged that local anarchists were aiding the IRA. A BAG meeting of about a dozen members or so got together and decided to draft a statement and send it to all the local papers refuting this. It read: 'the Belfast Anarchist Group refutes accusations from the English police that the Provisional IRA are being aided by Anarchist Groups. Anarchist groups, both here and in Britain, have continuously refused to support any group that hasn't the interests of the ordinary people at heart, but instead keeps itself in existence through authoritarian means and nationalist ideology (whether Irish nationalists like the IRA or Ulster nationalists like the UDA). Anarchists support the struggle of ordinary people to control their own destiny, whether Protestant or Catholic, white or black. And while we realise that social and political conditions make the rise of such groups as the IRA and the UDA almost inevitable, nevertheless although these groups rise from the people they can't be considered to be fighting for the people. The conditions that divide the working class are perpetuated by these groups through their inability or refusal to escape the trap of nationalism and sectarianism'. This statement enraged McGuffin, who felt that not only should they not be attacking the IRA, but, he insisted, they couldn't issue such a statement without the full participation of all BAG members. The BAG, of course, hadn't been meeting as often and



rarely with more than a few members present, but the criticism of McGuffin persuaded 4 members of the Group to leave and form the Belfast Libertarian Group, a move that had been coming for some time. This led to the collapse of the BAG, and none of McGuffin's supporters sought of resurrect it thereafter.<sup>22</sup> The degeneration of a potentially revolutionary situation and the sectarian entrenchment that had been increasingly apparent since the start of the 1970s, contributed in no small measure to this anarchist split. It had arisen out of the need for anarchists to provide an alternative (class) analysis to the nationalist and sectarian ones gaining in potency, and as a result of the theoretical support extended to republicans by some anarchists, rather than as an attempt to deal with practical anarchist support for the IRA's 'armed struggle'.

There was, on the other hand, one particular incident early in the Troubles occasionally cited as evidence of direct anarchist violence complicit with or sympathetic to the 'war' of republicans. The involuntary participation of at least one genuine anarchist and one who merely claimed for himself the label 'anarchist', has drawn the criticism of McGuffin himself, but remains an episode which needs clarification.

The story of a bomb plot against Queen's University hatched by a German anarchist, a New York photographer, a Belfast journalist and an unemployed salesman in the bar of the Wellington Park Hotel was, from the start, an unlikely tale. It did, however, prove a salacious one for a continually salivating media hungry for even a glimpse of the mad anarchist bomber bogeymen as a new angle on, or alternative to the grinding predictability of nationalist and sectarian violence. Step up James Joseph McCann, with a petty criminal past in Belfast and England, a slightly unhinged quality and a talent for invention. As a self-proclaimed 'anarchist', McCann had been hanging around the revolutionary tourist set based in the Wellington Park, close to Queen's from around about 1970. This had included, most famously, Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman of the American Yippies (Youth International Party), and the singer and poet, Phil Ochs. McGuffin and his comrades had also spent some time in the august company of these 'friends of the revolution', as McGuffin called them, and also knew McCann, of who he had a very poor opinion.<sup>23</sup> The basic bones of the story are that McCann in the company of Felix de Mendelssohn, Joseph Stevens and Peter McCartan, all working in one way or another as journalists, met him at Queen's on the promise of an exclusive, or perhaps after some drinks and goading from McCann. They were then treated to the spectacle of a Molotov cocktail attack on Queen's Common Room, a chase by a passing plainclothes RUC patrol and an armed standoff, before McCann surrendered his sawn-off shotgun and the unlikely quartet were arrested and remanded to Crumlin Road gaol. After some pre-trial theatrics and four months inside, McCann, who spent his term informing his Provo cellmate that the jail hadn't been built which could hold him, he broke out of the prison by sawing through the cell bars. The escape was the first since December 1960 and gained McCann some, largely self-generated, notoriety as the 'green' or 'shamrock pimp' and the original 'border fox'. McCann's subsequent escapades are well-documented by dope dealer Howard Marks in his autobiography, *Mr. Nice*, but basically he took up

cannabis-smuggling and re-used a proportion of the profits to send arms and explosives to the Provisional and/or Official IRA, and was allegedly involved in the bombing of a British Army barracks in Germany in 1973. None of this, of course, amounts to 'anarchist' activity and McCann was quite rightly seen as simply a fellow-traveller of the IRA who used libertarian ideas to justify a private business enterprise labelled criminal by the state.<sup>24</sup> His fellow-accused in 1971, Felix de Mendelssohn (who was acquitted with the others), had been a genuine anarchist involved with a group in Oxford in the early 1960s, and remembers Jim McCann as 'anarchic' but certainly no anarchist, merely 'a psychopath who used political labels where they suited him'. De Mendelssohn is now a professional psychoanalyst so can speak with some expertise in the area of McCann's mental make-up, and while he was impressed with McCann's escape, this does not affect his overall assessment of him as 'one of the craziest and most dangerous men I have ever met'.<sup>25</sup> After his arrest in 1979 and beating from the IRA prisoners in Portlaoise prison for the embarrassment of being caught with a large marijuana haul, McCann moved on to involvement in various capitalist ventures across the globe and has continued to evade conviction to the present day.<sup>26</sup> It is unclear how McCann became identified or associated with anarchism and in many ways it doesn't really matter, but the appearance of such maverick characters claiming to be anarchists has occasionally occurred over the years and caused no little damage to anarchism. It may well yet occur, and although other crude adventurers and crackpot dictators have claimed the socialist mantle from time to time, anarchism often appears to be judged more harshly whenever freelance lunatics attach themselves to it.

Despite John McGuffin's disdain for Jim McCann and his activities (he claimed that McCann *only* managed to smuggle in 4 handguns), some of his own comrades entered upon a 'criminal' career as anarchist expropriators. His former student and fellow internee Jack 'the whack' Crawford, was allegedly involved in the 1983 robbery of the Allied Irish Bank branch in Dun Laoghaire, which netted IR£8,500 for himself and possibly, the anarchist movement. Crawford, who had sold *Freedom* in Belfast's Castle Street in the 1960s, worked with McGuffin (like Jack White), as a lumberjack in Canada in the mid-to late 1970s, died sometime in the late 1990s, aged just 47. However, as with many of McGuffin's chequered memoirs it's unclear how much of this story is fiction and how much fact.<sup>27</sup> Neither is it clear who or how many of McGuffin's comrades were involved in this direct actionist expropriation in Dublin. There may also have been a tie-in between these individuals and the Murrays, Noel and Marie, who were involved in a similar activism at a slightly earlier stage. At least one contemporary anarchist who was also active in a different capacity in the 1970s feels that the Murray case did little other than 'add to the anarchist=terrorist stereotype'. This, however, pays little or no heed to a period of inveterate state reaction and right-wing repression throughout Europe as a response to rising working class and anti-fascist militancy, particularly in Spain and Portugal. The Murrays and others were part of this European, and indeed, international wave of militancy and their activism, although occasionally foolhardy and perhaps even naïve, was nonetheless sincere, heroic and a legitimate aspect of the ongoing class struggle. They furthermore, received the full vengeance of the state in a manner far beyond



that even reserved for Irish republicans, even though the violence employed by the anarchists was largely discriminate and accidental in a period when both loyalists and republicans, as well as the British state, were engaged in very deliberate, calculated and frequently indiscriminate acts of violence.<sup>28</sup>

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At the time of his death in 2002, John McGuffin was remembered by most as an anarchist, though he described himself as an anarchist-republican-Guevarist, and in Derry took his place in a tradition of anarchist republicans or republican anarchists stretching back quite a few years. For a self-confessed 'Lundy' this may be explicable but the association of anarchism with one side of the sectarian divide in the north is far from revolutionary, besides the fact that most anarchist republicans are, in fact, more often republican (and indeed, nationalist) than anarchist. They also proceed from the mistaken assumption that Irish republicanism is more progressive and/or less reactionary than Ulster loyalism, despite their shared bourgeois roots, their ingrained confessional nationalism and their repeatedly sectarian language and violence. It is a tradition which led the class struggle anarchist Albert Meltzer to declare that although the north had produced a number of anarchists over the years they had generally 'got caught up' in the nationalist and religious tensions.<sup>31</sup> This was not the case, however, for the small circle who broke away from McGuffin and co. and formed the Belfast Libertarian Group. In 1973 they produced the booklet *Ireland, Dead or Alive?* in which they criticised groups on the left who 'in the excitement and action that the Irish political scene engenders' have occasionally been swept along with the flow of events. They said this left-wing delusion was because they naturally supported those fighting the state and were lulled into the belief that the IRA were socialist and 'working for the freedom of the people, not only in the colonial sense, but in the social and economic sense'. They went on then to ask how socialist freedom could mean 'the blowing up of a café because young people were in it smoking dope' or if it meant 'beating up youths who take soft drugs', or 'tarring and feathering of girls just because they didn't see much wrong with going out with ordinary soldiers'. These were hard questions for those who gave succour to republicans and purported to be anarchists or libertarian socialists, and the response of the republicans was to threaten Belfast Libertarian Group members that they would be kneecapped. Not to be outdone, loyalists made similar threats to the Group a short time after, and it eventually folded. Such an outcome had been building for some time ever since the release and distribution of *Ireland, Dead or Alive?* and in spite of the fact that it was and is quite an insignificant and naïve publication in parts that was produced by a very small leftist organisation, with few credentials besides a sound anarchist analysis of a complicated and violent political morass. Having that point of view was not enough though, and the Group's own swansong was written in to the last page of its heroic little pamphlet: 'Nothing is new or radical in Irish politics...Northern Irish politics are the politics of the dead. No organisation offers real hope to the working class in Ireland. No organisation can until nationalism is taken right out of politics'.<sup>32</sup>

1. Albert Meltzer, *The Anarchists in London, 1935-55* (Orkney, 1976), p.20. Other Irish south London activists included Tom (Paddy) Burke, Bill Maguire, Patrick Monks and Kitty Lamb. Wilf McCartney should not be confused with CPGB and International Brigade leader Wilfred McCartney, who was wounded (some say by the Stalinists themselves) soon after the British Battalion landed in Spain.



2. John Taylor Caldwell, *Severely Dealt With: Growing up in Belfast and Glasgow* (Brighthouse, 1993). Caldwell grew up on the Mountpottinger Road in Belfast.
3. Joe Keenan (Ed.), *The Labour Opposition of Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1992), p.148.
4. Keenan, p.85.
5. Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824-1960* (Dublin, 1992), p.183; and Malachy Gray, 'Reminiscence: A Shop Steward Remembers', in *Saothar*, No.11 (1986), p.114, note 3.
6. Gray, p.110.
7. Letter from Andrew Boyd to the author, dated 29 January 2004.
8. Ronnie Munck, Bill Rolston, *Belfast in the Thirties* (Belfast, 1987), p.137.
9. Keenan, p.184. McMullen had a habit of responding to fundamentalist Christians who implored him to be 'born again' that he'd be glad to, so long as he had no stomach the second time around with which to feel the pangs of hunger.
10. Keenan, p.147.
11. Eamonn McCann, McGuffin obituaries, [www.irishresistancebooks.com/john.htm](http://www.irishresistancebooks.com/john.htm).
12. Máirtín Ó Catháin, McGuffin obituaries, [www.irishresistancebooks.com/john.htm](http://www.irishresistancebooks.com/john.htm); and John McGuffin, Book Review, 'Civil Society?', [www.irishresistancebooks.com/reviews/robson.htm](http://www.irishresistancebooks.com/reviews/robson.htm).
13. Paul Arthur, *The People's Democracy 1968-1973* (Belfast, 1974), pp.30-1.
14. Arthur, pp.36-8; and Bob Purdie, *Politics in the Streets: the origins of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1990), p.235; For an anarchist interpretation of the PD, see J. Quinn, 'No Surrender: History of the Early PD', in *Anarchy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, Vol.1, no.6 (1971), pp.14-21.
15. Alan MacSimóin, 'History of Anarchism in Ireland', in Workers Solidarity Movement webpage @ [http://flag.blackened.net/A/history\\_anr\\_irl.html](http://flag.blackened.net/A/history_anr_irl.html) (1996); and Eamonn McCann, and Anthony McIntyre, McGuffin obituaries, [www.irishresistancebooks.com/john.htm](http://www.irishresistancebooks.com/john.htm); and Arthur, p.39; and Correspondence from founding member of Belfast Anarchist Group, 23 September 2004. The mistaken story of McGuffin carrying the banner himself appears to have originated with Bernadette Devlin or her ghostwriter (see Bernadette Devlin, *The Price of My Soul* [London, 1969], p.125 & p.142).
16. Interview with and correspondence from founding member of Belfast Anarchist Group, 3 & 5 September and 15 October 2004; and *Belfast News Letter*, 18 January 1969. The occasion when 200 copies of *Freedom* was sold was quite unusual, most of the time the Group only sold 20 to 40 copies.
17. Arthur, pp.52-5. Correspondence from founding member of Belfast Anarchist Group, 13 October 2004.
18. Arthur, p.58; and Máirtín Ó Catháin, McGuffin obituaries, [www.irishresistancebooks.com/john.htm](http://www.irishresistancebooks.com/john.htm); and Máirtín Ó Catháin, 'Obituaries – John McGuffin', in *Saothar*, Vol.28 (2003), p.18. A few days before his death, which he knew was inevitable, McGuffin sent a note to Bernadette Devlin, which merely said 'Goodbye', something that enraged her and brought her to Derry to see him.
19. Arthur, p.92. Correspondence from founding member of Belfast Anarchist Group, 15 October 2004.
20. Arthur, pp.111-13; and John McGuffin, *Internment* (Tralee, 1973), chapter 1, 'It Happened Here', is McGuffin's personal account of his own internment experience.
21. John McGuffin, Dispatch 250 – June 17, 2001, <http://dispatches.phoblacht.net/archive/dispatch250.htm>; and Arthur, p.114 and p.149, note 10.
22. Correspondence from founding member of Belfast Anarchist Group, 13 October 2004.
23. John McGuffin, Dispatch 263 – August 28, 2001, <http://dispatches.phoblacht.net/archive/dispatch263.htm>; and Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London, 1992), pp.542-4. McGuffin said McCann, the 'Shamrock Pimpernel' was 'more sham than shamrock and more pimp than pimpernel'. On one occasion in Ochs company, McGuffin and Robin Dunwoody were returning from a party, and apparently had a handgun on them. Ochs had signed Robin's guitar and the group were in good form, when they came across an RUC patrol, and they narrowly escaped being stopped after Ochs started to shout abuse at the policemen.
24. *Belfast Telegraph*, 31 March and 14 June 1971; and *Irish News*, 1 & 2 July 1971 and 27 August 1979; and Mícheál MacUileagóid, *From Fetters to Freedom: The Inside Story of Irish Jailbreaks* (Belfast, 1996), pp.53-4; and Howard Marks, *Mr. Nice* (London, 1998). McCann had



claimed in a 1971 edition of the counter-cultural magazine *Friends*, edited by Alan Marcuson and others, and which interviewed him after his escape, that he was part of a no-doubt imaginary libertarian republican group called 'Free Belfast'. He tried to get some of the people around *Friends*, mostly inoffensive and well-meaning hippie types, to return to Belfast and take part in the 'revolution'. He even said they'd fight in the sewers, and one woman who actually went to Belfast said it was only when she arrived that she discovered that Belfast had no such sewers, only gutters and they were about 3 foot deep. (see Jonathon Green's book, *Days in the Life: Voices From the English Underground, 1961-71* [London, 1998]).

25. Private information supplied by Felix de Mendelssohn, 18 & 20 September 2004. De Mendelssohn's main memory of incarceration in Crumlin Road was reading Seán Edmonds' book, *The Gun, the Law and the Irish People* (Tralee, 1971), as he walked around the exercise yard. Joe Stevens aka Captain Snaps, went on to become the Sex Pistols photographer.
26. Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA* (London, 1987), p.536.
27. John McGuffin, *Last Orders, Please!* (Derry, 2000), pp.174-80; and Alan MacSimóin, 'History of Anarchism in Ireland', in Workers Solidarity Movement webpage @ [http://flag.blackened.net/A/history\\_anr\\_irl.html](http://flag.blackened.net/A/history_anr_irl.html) (1996).
28. Albert Meltzer, *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels* (London, 1996), pp.256-260; and Alan MacSimóin, 'History of Anarchism in Ireland', in Workers Solidarity Movement webpage @ [http://flag.blackened.net/A/history\\_anr\\_irl.html](http://flag.blackened.net/A/history_anr_irl.html) (1996); and Jurgen, McGuffin obituaries, [www.irishresistancebooks.com/john.htm](http://www.irishresistancebooks.com/john.htm). McGuffin campaigned with others to have the Murrays death sentence for the accidental killing of a Garda commuted.
29. Máirtín Ó Catháin, 'Obituaries – John McGuffin', in *Saothar*, Vol.28 (2003), p.18; and Pádraig McGuffin, McGuffin obituaries, [www.irishresistancebooks.com/john.htm](http://www.irishresistancebooks.com/john.htm); and Interview with founding member of Belfast Anarchist Group, 3 & 5 September 2004.
30. Jurgen, and Anthony McIntyre, and Máirtín Ó Catháin, and Garbhan Downey, McGuffin obituaries, [www.irishresistancebooks.com/john.htm](http://www.irishresistancebooks.com/john.htm). The books are *Last Orders, Please!* (Derry, 2000), and with Joe Mulheron, *Charles John 'Nomad' McGuinness* (Derry, 2002).
31. Meltzer, *Golden Angels*, p.256.
32. Belfast Libertarian Group, *Ireland, Dead or Alive?* (Belfast, 1973), pp.18-19 and pp.23-4.

## Conclusion

Anyone looking for a rogue's gallery or general litany of scallywags in this short history of Belfast anarchists will be disappointed. It is a story of small movements and peripheral figures gathered together over many years and presented to you, the reader, as an account of how Belfast produced and received anarchist activists. It is uneven in places, sketchy on context, and optimistic in analysis. Many may disagree with its content or even its 'regional' bias, but anarchists, as anti-nationalists, should resist (as anyone on the left should), the old 'national' histories of the past which ignore regional, cultural and ethnic diversity for the purpose of constructing a homogenous myth of use only to nationalists and their supporters. Anarchist historians should have, in my opinion, a bias for localised, working class narratives that draw on the lived experience only available in oral historical accounts and supported, where necessary and with caution, from other manuscript and published sources. To what extent this advice has been followed in this publication is open to question but an attempt has been made in general to produce an untold story with the sources available, written in an anarchist spirit with an anarchist bias.

The story of anarchism in Belfast post-1973 has obviously still to be told, and will hopefully, as with this work, be taken up, improved and expanded by others. Just Books, Belfast Anarchist Collective and the whole '80s anarchist punk scene will be just some of the aspects to be explored.

Anarchism is still an element in the north in general and in Belfast in particular, and is chiefly a synthesis of anarchist-communism and anarcho-syndicalism encapsulated organisationally in the class struggle anarchist group 'Organise!', which is still creating its own history. The global rise of the anti-capitalist movement has acted as a boon to anarchist movements everywhere, and not least here in the north. Devolution, though currently suspended, has also ensured that the Blairite neo-liberal agenda of privatisation, cuts in public services and its panoply of racist, authoritarian and anti-working class measures, can be pursued by local politicians on their days off from the hurly-burly of unrestrained sectarianism and petty bigoted arguments about a national question answered by European and global capitalism a long time ago. Unfortunately, however, British and Irish nationalism are still with us and are as potent as ever. Anarchists have our work cut out for us and many battles to fight, but fighting in the knowledge that we inherit the name and spirit of those working class militants who went before us under the banner of anarchy should encourage us, in Belfast or wherever else we may be found today.

'With a bent arm and a clenched fist in anarchy against all gods and masters'



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