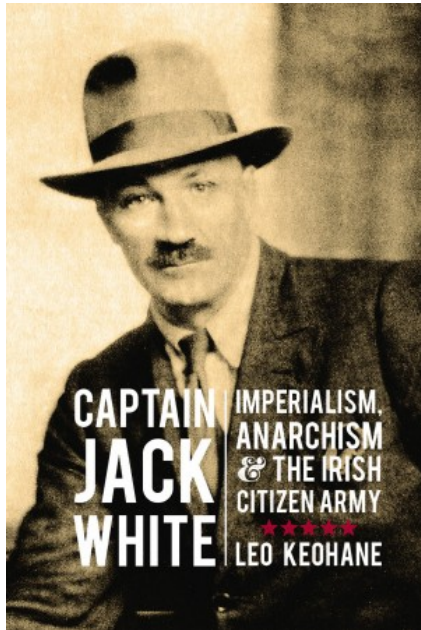


Review: Leo Keohane, *Captain Jack White: Imperialism, Anarchism and the Irish Citizen Army*

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Leo Keohane, *Captain Jack White: Imperialism, Anarchism and the Irish Citizen Army* Irish Academic Press, 2014. €20.95

Captain Jack White was one of the minor players in Irish history but he is deserving of this interesting biography. Leo Keohane describes the life and contradictory worlds of a man who knew Lord Kitchener, was a dinner companion of King Edward and the Kaiser, who corresponded with H.G. Wells, D.H. Lawrence and Tolstoy, and shared a platform with G.B. Shaw, Conan Doyle, Roger Casement, James Larkin, and James Connolly.

White was born in 1879, the son of Field Marshal Sir George White V.C. He was from a Protestant background in the North of Ireland. He attended public school in England, followed by a commission in the army; he distinguished himself in the Boer War and became aide-de-camp to his father when he was the Governor of Gibraltar. Undoubtedly a man destined for high position in the British establishment.

Jack White was a product of Empire, but his experience of colonialism pushed him in the opposite direction. White was revolted by his experience of the Boer War and sought solace in the pacifist writings of Tol-

stoy. He resigned from the army in 1907 and after a period of years he returned to Ireland in 1912. His early encounters with the sectarianism of Edward Carson and the Orange Order led him to attempt, along with Roger Casement and others, to rally a Protestant opposition.

Keohane's biography correctly sets White firmly in the context of the Irish Citizen Army, which is what he has been remembered for even though his time in it was a brief one. After Bloody Sunday in August 1914 in the first weeks of the Lockout both Larkin and Connolly were convinced that the workers needed an organisation of their own to protect picket lines and union meetings from assault by the police and the hired thugs of the employers. Captain Jack White proposed a 'drilling scheme' for locked out workers and that a fund be opened to buy boots and staves. He approached Connolly with the suggestion, offering his services to train and drill any organisation that was set up.

Within a fortnight the first 'red army' anywhere in the world had been formed; 1,200 had enrolled and drilling had commenced under the command of Captain James White in Croydon Park. In reality the difference between those who enrolled in a fit of enthusiasm and the numbers who turned up for training was substantial. The ICA was not exactly a 'Red Army' perhaps a 'Red Guard' is a more apt description. As the dispute petered out in early 1914 attendances at parades diminished and the organisation was practically moribund.

The Secretary, Sean O'Casey, suggested to Captain White that the ICA should be revitalised and that recruitment and drilling should recommence, and a fund be opened to raise money for equipment. Both Captain White and Constance Markievicz tried to smooth the strained relationship between the Citizen Army and the Volunteers that had developed in the course of the Lockout. In April 1914 White made an offer on

his own initiative to place two battalions of the Citizen Army at the disposal of the Volunteer Executive, if they would allow them to remain an independent body, affiliated to the Volunteers. Eoin McNeill replied on behalf of the Volunteers saying they could have no relationship with an organisation that had been in conflict with the police. This referred to an incident when Captain White was attacked by the police while leading a march of unemployed workers demanding relief. White was ambitious for the ICA to play a more pronounced role in Irish politics and was dissatisfied with growth and ambitions of the ICA. In May 1914 he tendered his resignation as chairman. White's resignation was an indication of the tensions in the ICA between those who believed that it should be a 'Red Guard' for the labour movement and the republican current who wanted the ICA to play a part in the broader nationalist movement. White's letter, explaining his resignation in the *Evening Telegraph* reflected this tension:

In my opinion the all-important point is the speedy formation and equipment of a volunteer army implicitly or explicitly determined to achieve the independence and maintain the unity of Ireland, and I will not lift a finger to embarrass any body likely to work for this end.

The danger of liquidating the labour movement into the broader nationalist camp was always present, or of making political concessions that marginalised the labour programme in the name of unity. Captain Jack White in his autobiography first published in 1930 reflecting on his resignation from the ICA believed that if he had not resigned he might have shifted Irish politics to a more leftwing position.

If I had stayed with the Citizen Army instead of going off in a huff to the National Volunteers when the Transport Union appointed a committee to clip my wings and control me, I believe I could have merged National in

Labour ideals instead of leaving the merger to come the other way round.

White joined the Irish Volunteers despite his dislike for Redmond's politics. He organised and commanded a brigade of 5,000 men in County Derry. But his authority was increasingly undermined by the sectarian suspicions of those in the Derry Volunteers who doubted that a Protestant like White would ever lead them into a fight against Orangemen.

At the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 White resigned from the Volunteers and joined the British ambulance service. Always the maverick, looking for personal solutions to political problems he wrote to various leading figures in the British establishment proposing the formation of a sort of Irish auxiliary force for the British war effort - not unlike John Redmond's call for Irishmen to enlist in the British Army.

His service in the British ambulance corps during the war meant he was isolated from events in Ireland, though in 1916 White tried with little or no success to lead the south Wales miners out on strike to prevent the execution of James Connolly. Back in Ireland after the war he assisted with the Sinn Féin election campaign in 1918 and published an analysis of Sinn Féin and the future of Ireland in socialist terms.

For the rest of his life White was marginal to Irish politics. He was arrested in Belfast in 1931 while on a 'hunger march' with a group dedicated to the unemployed. White received a beating from the RUC and a month in prison. White joined the Republican Congress in 1934 a left-wing split from the IRA, which led to a number of clashes between the two organisations. In 1934 White was attacked by IRA men while leading a branch of the Republican Congress, to Bodenstown for the Wolfe Tone commemoration.

White went to Spain shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War began in 1936, though his actions there are uncertain. Keohane finds a second-hand account of him as a Spanish Republican training officer 'doubtful'. But like George Orwell he returned

from Spain convinced that Stalinism had betrayed the revolution and was now the enemy within the movement. By 1939 White was convinced that Germany and the USSR were 'cementing an ideological union that was a threat to humanity in general and to Britain in particular'. He joined with General Gough of the British Army in an appeal against Germany and offered his services to the RUC in Northern Ireland for the duration of the war; which of course was refused.

White was unpredictable, a political loner who never lasted any length of time in any of the various organisations he joined. In many ways he was an earlier version of Noel Browne, a maverick who never put personal advancement before principle, but ut-

terly incapable of disciplined and united action. James Connolly always insisted on speaking after White because he could never be certain of what he might say.

By 1940 White was a spent force eking out a scant living selling vegetables from his garden. James White was an Anarchist with socialist leanings, a Republican, an opponent of Redmond, Griffith and DeValera, and deeply suspicious of religion. He was a deep thinker, yet also a man of action. Despite all his failing he was on the right side more times than most. His death in 1946 received scant attention beyond his family and friends, but Keohane's book does justice to this interesting political maverick.