

The mysterious death of Alwyn Skinner (1912-1938)



A short account of the life and mysterious death of Alwyn Skinner, International Brigade volunteer

In the grounds of Victoria Gardens in Neath stands a memorial to three Neath volunteers for the International Brigades who all met their deaths in Spain. One of the three is listed as Alwyn Skinner. This appears to have been one Alwyn E. Skinner listed as having been born in Neath in January 1912. The monument was erected in 1996. However, earlier on the inclusion of Alwyn Skinner would have met opposition from within the Communist Party. When the chief agent of the Communist Party of Great Britain in Spain during the Civil War, the arch-Stalinist Bill Rust, drew up his list of Brigaders who had died in Spain in his book *Britons in Spain* (1939) Skinner was one of those not listed. He was also not on the list compiled by the International Brigades Association of those killed in action.

Why? Perhaps one clue lies in the following mention of Skinner in Kenneth B. John's *Anti-Parliamentary Passage: South Wales and the Internationalism of Sam Mainwaring (1841-1907)*:

"...Alwyn Skinner, was widely acknowledged, in the town, to have 'changed sides', he left Neath a Communist and died an Anarchist. The change may have been wholly brought about by Catalonian experiences, paralleling those of George Orwell and Ken Loach's leading character".

We know that Skinner was a member of the Neath C.P. cell. We also know that he worked hard to mobilise against a Mosleyite march through Swansea. He seems to have known the Spanish in Abercrave (see my article here on libcom Spanish Anarchists in the South Wales Valleys). In fact two Spaniards from Abercrave, one of them the son of the anarchist Melchior Esteban, Victoriano, also volunteered for the International Brigades. Victoriano's death is also shrouded in mystery. Skinner himself went out to Spain as a member of one of the several groups of Welsh volunteers in spring 1937.

He experienced a baptism of fire as the small steamship he was on, the Ciudad de Barcelona, which was carrying 250 volunteers to Barcelona from Marseilles in France, was torpedoed by an Italian submarine with the loss of 100 volunteers on May 30th 1937. Skinner was among the 17 British volunteers who survived the torpedoing.

Skinner's letters from Spain to his two married sisters, Dilys and Thelma, are preserved in the Richard Burton Archive at Swansea University, and provide interesting insights into the Spanish situation.

Skinner was not cleared for service at the front until some weeks after the torpedoing. He eventually reached the XV Brigade (composed mainly, but not entirely, of English-speaking volunteers) just as it was being retreated from the horrendous battle of Brunete. During the following rest period he was given responsibility for the wall newspaper produced by the Brigade as well as working on clerical duties as he was "well-read and a skilled typist" (Stradling). This indicates the sort of work he was doing in civilian life.

He was not called upon to take part in the battle for Belchite though he was close enough to witness the attack on Quinto at close hand, as his correspondence testifies. However by now the Brigade had lost many volunteers in battle and it appears that he now took part in front-line infantry moves in the attack on Fuentes de Ebro in mid-October 1937. His battalion advanced on Francoist trenches and was repulsed time after time, with much loss of life.

These experiences made him apply for leave and then just after the fall of Belchite. Both of these requests were refused. As the historian Antony Beevor noted:

"The persistent trouble in the Brigades also stemmed from the fact that the volunteers, to whom no length of service had ever been mentioned, assumed that they were free to leave after a certain time. Their passports had been taken away on enlistment. Krivitsky claimed that these were sent to Moscow by diplomatic bag for use by NKVD agents abroad. Brigade leaders who became so alarmed by the stories of unrest filtering home imposed increasingly stringent measures of discipline. Letters were censored and anyone who criticized the competence of the Party leadership faced prison camps, or even firing squads. Leave was often cancelled, and some volunteers who, without authorization, took a few of the days owing to them, were shot for desertion when they returned to their unit. The feeling of being trapped by an organization with which they had lost sympathy made a few volunteers even cross the lines to the Nationalists. Others tried such unoriginal devices as putting a bullet through their own foot when cleaning a rifle (10 volunteers were executed for self-inflicted wounds)." (from *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*)

Skinner did obtain the post of company quartermaster, which kept him from the front. In winter he became ill and was evacuated to a hospital on the day that his battalion moved out towards Teruel. The hospital at Tarancon was bombed and Skinner was moved further south to Orihuela in Murcia. From this hospital he wrote to one of his sisters that he was to be reviewed by a medical tribunal. : "Not that I regret for one minute my coming here. Not at all. I should never have missed the coming, the risks, the hell. Even altho' when I return I have to start my life all over again-no work-no security". He was granted a further 5 weeks convalescence. He eventually arrived at the Teruel HQ of the battalion. On the 20th February he wrote that he had taken part in "a very successful night action" and also to be "working with the Political Commissariat". He wrote three days later that he was leaving for the front. This was the last letter Skinner's sisters were to receive. Official documents are not forthcoming about his whereabouts and about the fact that he might have deserted. A muster roll records him working for the medical services in Barcelona as late as June 1938.

That he died in Spain seems certain. But when and where? Kenneth John's enigmatic allusion to Skinner's

conversion to Anarchism might imply that he fell into the hands of the SIM, the Stalinist secret police responsible for the death of many revolutionaries.

Certainly Bill Rust seems to have had knowledge about Skinner that he never publicly divulged. But as Stradling says it was "...revealing that Skinner and Durston (another volunteer who died mysteriously on the front N.H.) were not even seriously considered as eligible" until a new phase of information gathering and fund-raising began in the 1970s with the 40th anniversary of the Civil War. Hywel Francis, head of the Miners' Library in Swansea included Durston, Skinner and Esteban in his book *Miners Against Fascism*.

Rust compiled the Roll based on the Battalion War Diary kept by its secretary Ted Edwards and then by Billy Griffiths.

Another book that came out after Stradling's reveals some more about Skinner. Edwin Greening (1910-2003) was a miner from Aberaman who joined the ILP Guild of Youth in 1929 and later the C.P. in 1933. After the Second World War he joined the Labour Party and served as a councillor between 1960 and 1968. His memoirs appeared posthumously in 2006. He became an IB volunteer. Within the Brigades, political commissars kept records of Brigaders making comments on their characters and politics. One of the most zealous was the education commissar Billy Griffiths, an individual noted for his lack of human warmth. He wrote that Greening was a "neo-Trotskyite" who persuaded men to desert (in fact Greening fought bravely throughout his time in Spain). William Durston was "a dubious individual, being watched". Rust reported on the brave IB nurse Nan Green as being an "adventurer" who should be expelled from Spain. How do we know all of this? Because these files were deposited with the Comintern in Moscow and can be accessed.

Greening incurred the wrath of Brigade commander Capt. Sam Wild because he was called as a witness when Wild was investigated for quitting the field at Caspe. Greening recalls a rally in March 1938 where Wild gave a speech. He remembered that Lt. Tom Evans turned to him, Nan Green and Miles Tomalin and said bitterly: "Some bloody hero. At Caspe he and the HQ of the Battalion buggered off and left everybody to find their way out. Wild and the HQ should have been shot". Wild himself and his adjutant George Fletcher had executed the Irish volunteer Maurice Emmett Ryan by shooting him in the back of the head Cheka-style. Ryan had been under suspicion for a while for supposed fascist sympathies, with his upper class origins also working against him. He was executed for supposedly firing on his own side (although there has been much discussion as to the truth of this) and for drunkenness. Interestingly when Wild tried to stop wine drinking completely in the 15th Battalion the rank and file kicked up a fuss, saying that Wild got so drunk most nights that he had to be brought back in a truck. The political commissars then overruled Wild.

When the 15th returned to London on 7th December 1938 they were given a dinner at the Cooperative Hall in Whitechapel. Greening remembers that relatives of those who had disappeared came up to him and asked what had happened to their relatives. These were Durston's mother, one of Skinner's sisters, and Victoriano Esteban's brother (probably Gregorio). Wild was talking to the CP leaders Pollitt, Gallagher, and to Fletcher, the 15th's chief of staff Malcolm Dunbar, and Bob Cooney, the 15th's commissar." I went up to Wild and asked to speak to him. He glared at me and said "What do you want, Greening?" in a most aggressive and unfriendly way. I replied "These people have asked to see you. They want to know about their relations in the Battalion who have not come back from Spain with us today" ". Wild said to Mrs Durston that he knew nothing about her son: "he is posted missing, believed killed".

"Miss Skinner and Mr Esteban then asked about their brothers. Major Wild looked at the man and woman, then at me, and with a sullen contemptuous look he said with a snarl "Skinner and Esteban deserted to the Fascists. You'd better ask the Franco Government about them". Then he turned his back on us and went back to the notables. Mrs Durston, Miss Skinner and Mr Esteban were left in pain, speechless

amazement”.

Esteban did end up Rust's on the Roll of Honour where he is listed as Esteban (CP) Abercrave. Later in Bill Alexander's Book *British Volunteers for Liberty* (1982) he is listed as "Killed, whereabouts unknown" with no place, month or year. Durston is also listed but Skinner does not make it. Alexander used Rust's previous role with modifications provided by other survivors and relatives. The War Diary of the British Battalion went missing in 1940. Greening remarks: "Therefore, it was recorded, maybe in the lost Battalion War Diary in 1938, that Durston, Skinner and Esteban, according to some persons in 1938, were deserters, but nearly fifty years later, neither Durston, Skinner nor Esteban have come back from Spain".

Much more research needs to be done on Skinner and indeed Durston and Esteban and what happened to them in 1938.

Nick Heath

Sources:

Robert Stradling. *Wales and the Spanish Civil War: The Dragon's Dearest Cause* (2004)

Edwin Greening. *From Aberdare to Albacete: a Welsh International Brigader's memories of his life.* (2006)