

Barton ‘Nick’ Carter ex-Class of 1937: How one of Tyler Dennett’s ‘Nice Boys’ (from Boston) was Radicalized in Spain

This story begins March 2005 in Thompson Memorial Chapel. About the Chapel on the walls are lists of Williams men who died in America’s wars, beginning with the founder, Ephraim Williams, in 1755. Singing in the Chapel Choir from 1954-1957, I had noticed the lists in the chancel near the stalls, and drew the inference that more young men MY age had died of the Spanish flu in World War I than had died in the trenches in France, but had never examined with care the World War II lists in the west nave. One listing caught my attention. The date was April 1938, too early for World War II. Reading to the left, I saw Calaceite, Spain, and the name of Barton Carter, Class of 1937.

Knowing next to nothing about the Spanish Civil War, I went to the College Archives in Stetson Hall, found a file on Carter, and began a program of reading and research that led me to the Marx Memorial Library, London, the Tamiment Archive at the Bobst Library, New York University, the American Friends Service Archives in Philadelphia, the National Archives in Washington, D.C., the University of Rhode Island Archives in Kingston, R.I., the Bancroft Archives at the University of California, Berkeley, the American Red Cross Chapter House in Nashua, N.H. and, finally, Concord, N.H., where Carter’s niece, Nancy Carter Clough, graciously allowed me access to Carter’s personal papers and other family records.

Early experiences at Williams

Carter came to Williams College in September 1933, in the last year of Harry Garfield’s long presidency, from St. Paul’s School, Concord, N.H. Earlier, he had attended the Fessenden School in Newton, Massachusetts. He did not stand out academically or athletically at either school. The 1930 Census shows him living with his parents, Winthrop L. and Elizabeth Barton Carter, and three siblings in Brookline. Winthrop Carter was CEO of the Nashua Gunned Paper Corporation until his untimely death in 1944, and was, for a period in the 1930’s, president of the New England Council, and also on the Federal Reserve Board, Boston.

At the time, Williams was a very traditional, conservative college. It was believed by some to be a suitable place for sons of wealth who could not get into Harvard. The undergraduates reflected their parents’ conservative political views. For example, a student poll by the *Daily Princetonian* in October 1936 showed that over 75% of Williams students favored Landon over Roosevelt. As for a student exchange program from Germany, which had been cancelled in 1936 by the Trustees after eight years, the *Williams Record* reported that Williams students favored its continuation even if the more recent German students had been politically selected by the new Nazi government.

At Williams, Carter was wooed by all the fraternities, but pledged to Delta Psi, the exclusive fraternity also known as St. Anthony’s Hall, now the Center for Development Economics. His scrapbook, maintained for his first two years at Williams, is mostly a collection of theatre tickets, and pictures of attractive young women, often debutantes. More sterner stuff is a notice from the

Dean requesting his presence to explain why he had cut too many classes, and a dismal grade summary for fall 1934, which improved greatly in spring 1935.

Tyler Dennett, President of Williams, 1934-1937

The only item of a political nature in the scrapbook is a *New York Times* clipping reporting some critical remarks directed publicly against Garfield's successor, Tyler Dennett, by Harry Hopkins, advisor to another president, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Dennett, a good Republican, had refused to use federal funds to provide more scholarships for Williams matriculates and had expressed his distaste at accepting federal support in colorful language. This, despite the fact that lack of scholarship money at the pit of the Great Depression was holding back Dennett's often stated determination to make Williams "look more like America," by which he meant accepting more public high school boys.

Perhaps important in understanding how Carter's interests would evolve was another clipping, "The Right Kind of 'Snob' Speech," of an undated, but early talk by Tyler Dennett at the Harvard Club, Boston. Encouraging a new set of attitudes toward the world of tomorrow, Dennett said, "There is something going on in this nation which has disturbed your parents and grandparents. I do not know what the outcome of this activity will be, but I do know that all special social privileges will be decreased." He added, "Neither labels, nor the comfortable accession to father's money, would suffice a man's need anything like so readily in the future as they have in the recent past."

Concerned that Williams not be taken as a super prep school, Dennett pushed hard from the beginning to recruit better qualified faculty, and increase the intellectual tone on campus. Typical was an Oxford Union style debate which he fostered in March 1935, nine months into his administration. The resolution was "Dennett is heading in the wrong direction." After spirited debate, the ayes had it, 21 to 15!

Unfortunately, Dennett is perhaps best remembered now for a speech he gave to the Boston alumni, probably including several trustees, in March 1937. No typescript or copy of the speech has been found, but while repeating his wish to make Williams look more like America, it was reported that he also said that Williams should admit fewer "nice boys," although it has come down as (fewer) "nice boys from Boston." An uproar followed immediately, with Williams made a laughing stock in the newspapers of other Ivy League colleges. Letters from Williams alumni were also critical. Dennett tried on several occasions to explain what he meant by "nice boys," but the damage among members of Williams core community was done.

Later that spring, Dennett publicly criticized some Williams students appearing in an issue of *Life* magazine showing how students recreated. The shots showed men and their dates cavorting with open containers at the 'Tubs,' a then popular waterfall and picnic spot near North Pownal, Vermont. The article featured pictures of how college students at many similar schools recreated, but Dennett maintained that the pictures were damaging to Williams' reputation. Other considerations seemed to be the immediate trigger for Dennett's resignation, which was accepted by the trustees in July 1937.

Carter falls in love

Most likely around Christmas 1935, Carter fell in love. His inamorata was Joan Kent, who had come from England to stay with a neighbor of the Carters' in Brookline. The scrapbook was scrapped! While driving to Pittsfield, Mass. with W. Farnsworth Fowle, Class of 1937, to pick up the proofs of the Williams yearbook, the *Gulielmsonian*, in spring 1936, Fowle (editor) remembers that Carter (business manager) was preoccupied with keeping his grades up so as to avoid Friday classes. Not only did he take the Boston and Maine train to Boston on Thursday night to see Joan, she also came to campus, but apparently not on winter house party weekend in February 1936. At the time, the *Williams Record* published the list of all female guests by fraternity house; Joan Kent is not on the list. However, a fraternity brother, the late Reverend Larry Whittemore, Class of 1939, remembered her coming to Williamstown for a weekend in early 1936, perhaps after Joan and Barton were engaged. Carter's parents tried to dissuade him, but to no avail. A deal was cut; they would marry in July 1936 in England, and then return together to Williamstown so that Carter could graduate, and complete a chemistry major.

Elizabeth Barton Carter was already in England helping with the wedding preparations when Barton and Joan set sail together for England in June 1936. Despite this promising start, something happened either on the boat or after they reached England and a week before the wedding, Joan backed out. The reasons were not explicit, but seemed to involve generic 'health' issues. Carter, devastated and embarrassed, stayed on a few weeks, but decided the situation was hopeless, and returned to Boston. Learning that some of his classmates were then vacationing in Colorado, he took a train west, but was back in Boston within a week. It was then that he decided not to return to Williams, and instead go to England and find a job. The family mobilized his Williams friends to encourage him to return and graduate, and induced Professor Karl Weston of the Art Department to write Barton, but to no avail.



Barton Carter, 1936 (Courtesy of Nancy Carter Clough)

Through the assistance of the father of a classmate, Carter found a position with Spencer Trask, a well-known American brokerage house with an office in London. His work as an analyst there is described by a colleague writing to Carter's father much later from Gibraltar. There are no extant letters to or from his parents from this early period in London, but we know from postcard traffic that Carter visited the Netherlands for some long weekends in November 1936 and had a very active social life. Because of an expressed interest in freelance work as a correspondent, he left Spencer Trask by the beginning of December and went to Paris to meet, and seek advice from, Peter and Ione Rhodes. At the time, Rhodes, a graduate of the Columbia School of Journalism and a friend of Carter's aunt and uncle, was working for the *Paris Tribune*. Both Peter, but especially Ione, were seriously involved with French groups in providing assistance to refugees in Spain. The Civil War there, begun by Franco in July 1936 against a freely elected Government, was by the end of the year approaching a serious turn in the battle for Madrid. Ione, still alive at 98 in Paris, remembers meeting Carter, and produced a portrait-style photo of Barton from her file. At about this time, Carter adopted the first name, 'Nick,' possibly because of the Nick Carter detective novels, the so called 'penny dreadfuls' that were then the rage of Europe. While the name change might have resulted from incessant teasing, it also may have given him some separation from the protected life from which he already was edging away.

Before returning to Boston by Christmas, Carter visited Barcelona, and returned there early in 1937 after publishing an article in the *Boston Globe* on January 3 on Spanish politics and the refugee crises there. This is his only known newspaper article as a freelance reporter. A Spanish Civil War propaganda poster, entitled "Smash Fascism" in Catalanian, and known to have been first printed in fall 1936, was found in his papers. A penciled note in the margin says Sunday, January 3, which, according to the historic calendar, must be 1937.



Aixafem el Feixisme (Smash Fascism), gift of Nancy Carter Clough. (Courtesy of the Chapin Library)

Although Carter had been the beneficiary of a Trust account since his 21st birthday on March 19, 1936, and so had secure funding for his exploratory travels, he found freelance reporting difficult

to break into and, possibly for this and other reasons, he contracted to drive a truck between Madrid and Valencia for the National Joint Committee (NJC). Set into motion because of the failure of the liberal Western democracies to act against Franco, and his Italian and German allies, this English umbrella non-governmental organization was organized to raise money and channel non-military assistance to the Spanish Republic. At the head of the NJC were the Duchess of Athol, Lady Katherine Stewart Murray, a Conservative MP from Scotland; John Langdon-Davies, a well-known science reporter for the *London Chronicle*; and Edwin Roberts, a Liberal MP from Carlyle.

The main function of these small trucks, many donated by the U.S.S.R., some with a hammer and sickle painted crudely on the cab, was to take food into besieged Madrid. On the return trip, children were taken to safety from the random terror bombing by the Italians and the German Condor Legion which a few months later in May 1937 savaged Guernica. There was always the danger of being strafed on the back roads from Madrid to Valencia, but 'Nick' expressed confidence that he and the other drivers could minimize that risk, and apparently did.

After he had completed his two to three month contract with the NJC, he joined his father in London to witness the May 1937 coronation of George VI. It had been suggested that he return with his father to the U.S., but 'Nick' had made it clear that he would return to Spain. In England, he caught up with his mail, including the *Williams Record*, and wrote an interesting and passionate letter from Madrid to the editor about a recent model League of Nations exercise that Williams students had participated in. The heading was, "Carter, ex-'37, Condemns Absurdity of Model League in Letter from Madrid." Didn't they understand what was really happening in Spain? That non-intervention was a farce? That the fascists were terror bombing the civilian population? The article appeared with his picture in the May 18 issue of the *Record*, the last one of the academic year. There was no published reaction to his letter.

Foster Parents Plan for Spanish Children (FPP)

Toward the middle of 1937, Carter accepted a position with the Foster Parents Plan (FPP) in Puigcerda, Spain, right on the French border. The FPP was the brainchild of Langdon-Davies and Eric Muggeridge, a younger brother of the more famous Malcolm. Donors, then mostly from England, would adopt an orphaned and/or refugee child and in monthly installments fund a comprehensive home-like environment for their child, including food, shelter, education, protection, etc. It was a much more expensive proposition than the soup kitchens run by Quaker relief and Save the Children, and came in for criticism as unrealistic, given the magnitude of the refugee problem as the Civil War, in significant part a war by Franco against large segments of the Spanish population, ground on. The FPP children were housed at Puigcerda in three colonies, actually former ski chalets requisitioned by the Republican government in Barcelona. FPP had also hired Esme Odgers, an Australian woman, to work with Carter.

Since it was imperative to keep the connection between the child and the donor positive, much effort was made in letter writing. Carter also started a monthly newsletter that could be shared with sponsors in England. Because of difficulties in finding food in Spain for the children, Carter took the initiative in an August 1937 visit to England to visit Roberts in Carlyle, and

propose significant changes in the supply line, all of which were accepted. It is clear that Carter subsidized these changes with funds from his Trust account, then received in a French bank just across the border in Bourg-Madame. It is said that Carter was unusually successful in scrounging up food supplies in France, and then driving them safely across the border to Puigcerda. Clearly, however, it was getting harder and harder as the Civil War wore on.



Carter, Esme and the children at Puigcerda, fall 1937. (Courtesy of Nancy Carter Clough)

As the fall of 1937 went on, he wrote to his mother of his increasing attachment to Esme, and his political discussions with her. At some point, she must have told him she was a member of the Communist Party of Australia and, before embarking for Spain in March 1937, had been a secretary in the CPA office, Sydney. He tried repeatedly to shake his mother's faith in capitalism and the private sector. His mother's letters to him have been lost, but it is clear that he wasn't making much headway with his argument.

Fund raising in the U.S.

Toward the end of the year, with money running low and donor fatigue setting in from English sources, a decision was made by FPP to open up an office in North America in New York City. Eric Muggeridge, not Carter, would be the new representative, but Carter was asked to come over on the Queen Mary in late November 1937 to introduce Muggeridge to his friends and other aid groups, for example, the American Friends Society in Philadelphia. He would also do some fund raising with his classmates at St. Paul's and Williams, and at his father's Exchange Club in Boston. Carter's talk at the Exchange Club on December 5, a joint writing effort with Muggeridge and Langdon-Davies, put his growing maturity and idealism on display. According to an October 1938 State Department report in the *New York Times* on funds raised under the new Foreign Agents Registration Act, Carter raised \$3,100 for FPP. There were no

administrative charges. Without lingering on even to spend Christmas with his family, Carter quickly returned to Spain by mid-December; he wanted to spend Christmas with the children and Esme.

The Italians Bomb Puigcerda

In January 1938, the Italian air force bombed the town of Puigcerda, doing damage to the railroad station and killing a tradesman known to Carter, but not hitting the Colonies or the children. Precautionary trenches to shelter the children were dug near the colonies after this attack. Since the town was not a military target, Carter was incensed. It is also plain that his relationship with Esme had changed suddenly, and that working with her had become difficult.

Probably by the end of January 1938, Carter decided he ought to do more for Spain and decided to enlist in the British Brigade. The fact that the Republican forces had recaptured Teruel in December and the positive propaganda which flowed from that (pyrrhic) victory disguised the fact that the Republican forces were weak, and increasingly vulnerable to the much better equipped and fed fascist forces from within Spain, abetted by several divisions of Italian troops, Moorish units from North Africa, and the German air force and artillery units. In fact, Teruel had been re-taken in January, but Carter apparently did not know this. Nor was he aware that the flow of internationals entering Spain to fight had slowed down significantly before the end of 1937. The word was out that you might actually die in Spain.

A letter announcing his intention to enlist was received by his parents after he signed on in Figueras on February 22, 1938. His father tried to discourage him from enlisting, but it was too late. He also said he had resigned from the FPP, adding that “he should have thrown her (Esme) out” rather than leaving himself. His complete enlistment form has not been found, but some of the particulars appear in the Moscow Files. It is noted in these documents, released only after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1989, that Carter had declared himself a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Swayed by months of discussions with Esme, he must have joined the Party in England just before embarking on his fund raising tour, or on his hurried return to Spain. This decision was never revealed to his family. Since no pre-WW II list of CPGB members is known to exist, this information cannot be verified.

Training at Albacete and the Retreats

After enlisting, Carter received some military training at Albacete. At this point in the Civil War, because of the non-intervention policies of the Western democracies, there were severe shortages of weapons for training. In the field, Republican forces increasingly were arming themselves with captured weapons or weapons taken from fellow soldiers who had been invalided or killed. By March 17, when he wrote his last letter from Valencia, he had been in training as a medical orderly at the local hospital, but expected to be called up to the front soon. Unlike his earlier mail, the last few letters were subject to military censorship, so Carter likely self-censored them. Still, he wondered about the wisdom of having signed on, but it was “too

late to change (my) mind.” The letter was received in the U.S. on April 2, three days after his unit was ambushed while marching north from Calaceite.

Ambush, and the aftermath

In early March 1938, while Carter had been in training, the Brownshirts had marched into Austria, and the fascist forces had attacked massively with a clear intent to follow the Ebro River to the sea and split the Republic. Their first surge, a massive Blitzkrieg-like operation starting from around Belchite, to the east of Sarragosa, had overwhelming artillery support from new German weaponry, and almost total control of the skies. The Republican forces, by then predominately Spanish rather than international volunteers, for the most part had fallen back in a disorganized rout to positions around Caspe and Gandesa. Carter probably arrived at the front after the fascists started moving northeast again after a week’s pause to digest their gains. By then, Republican communications were virtually non-existent, units had been decimated with little time to regroup, and there were insufficient numbers of spotter planes to inform officers where the fascist columns were. It was in this confused situation that Carter’s unit marched headlong into an advancing Italian tank and infantry column early the morning of March 31.

Initially, the commander of the brigade thought the Italians were Republican forces. For this error, he was shot dead almost immediately by an Italian officer in the lead tank. Despite the inequality of fire power, there was stiff resistance as the Republican column moved off the road behind rocks and brush. When the active fighting ceased, however, an estimated 150 of 600 British brigade members were dead. Others were captured, many to be taken away and shot out-of-hand by a special Spanish unit which followed the advancing front for this purpose. If you were lucky enough to be captured by Italians, however, an amnesty had been ordered until April 7 to collect enough prisoners for a swap. Unfortunately, the amnesty was not always honored.

Carter was marching with his smaller unit at the rear of the column, which saved him from injury during the ambush. In a group of about twenty men, and in the ensuing confusion, they hid until nightfall and then began moving with stealth toward the northeast. Their aim was to reach the Ebro River and swim across it to the Republican lines on the north bank. Because Carter’s unit leader, Sergeant Alan Logan, was captured, and wrote two letters after his release from a POW camp in early 1939 to Winthrop Carter, we know of the tribulations of this brave, hunted group of men.

The countryside through which they moved was infested by fascist units moving in a roughly parallel direction toward the Mediterranean coast. At night they had to dodge their way through small fascist encampments, sometimes stepping inadvertently on sleeping men. They rested during the day. Food and water were very scarce, although Carter’s excellent Spanish helped enormously with scattered peasants who gave them food and water. When they entered the Sierra Pandols, a range of steep mountains just to the South of the Ebro, they had to move on the steep sides of narrow valleys. Above them were machine gun nests, and below were fascist encampments next to the limited water sources. Men kept drifting off to save themselves as discipline waned, and their desperation increased. By about April 9, however, they knew they were probably within a day or two of reaching the Ebro. However, the fascist advance had been

so overwhelming as to reduce greatly their chances of negotiating the flood plain and reaching the river. Carter was tall and useful as a scout. On the morning of April 9, he and several others inched up a hill to see where the fascist patrols might be. Logan reported hearing cries, and then bursts of machine gun fire. Carter and the men with him were never seen alive again. Logan pushed on down the valley alone and was captured by an Italian patrol two days later on a path near the Ebro River. Using a sketch map that Logan drew in his letter, and after some reconnaissance in the area in September 2007, it seems likely that Carter was shot, or captured and then shot, in the foothills about a mile or two above the town of Xerta. We are unlikely to ever know for sure; international brigadiers did not wear dog tags, and there is no evidence that the fascist forces organized systematic burial details and kept records of their work.

The story of Barton Carter is especially tragic because of what he might have become. He grew enormously during his work in Spain, displaying understanding, compassion, discipline, and leadership in organizing to feed the orphaned children under FPP's care. His political understanding also grew, and without any evidence of Communist Party dogma. The children wept openly when he left Puigcerda to enlist---clearly the worst decision of his young life. In late November 1941, a former Carter family home in Nashua, N.H. was dedicated in his name as a Chapter House for the American Red Cross. Professor Brainerd Mears, Chemistry Department, represented Williams College.

Tyler Dennett's extemporaneous, casual generalization suggests that one should never underestimate the potential of "nice boys." The Spanish Civil War saw an outpouring of popular support from democratic countries in reaction to the craven non-interference policies of their governments. Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were born at this time. The NGO that Carter worked with, FPP, is now Plan, which is still in the news. On April 19, 2009, the *New York Times* op-ed correspondent, Nicholas Kristof, who is asked frequently which international organizations one might support, wrote that through Plan he supported a child in the Dominican Republic. Kristof opined that if this young man ever became a Yankee, he might have a chance at season tickets! Nick Carter probably rooted for the Boston Red Sox, but I think he would have smiled.

Postscript

There is some evidence that, perhaps because of the special politics of the Spanish Civil War, adding Carter's name to the WW II list on the west wall in Thompson Chapel received special evaluation. His name is not out of Class order, as a few deaths recognized after the fall 1946 WW II Thompson Chapel dedication ceremony are. However, Carter's name is out of alphabetical order within his Class, the only such instance among the Williams WW II deaths recognized by the end of 1946. It suggests perhaps some hesitation, and a last minute decision, to include Carter as the list was being affixed to the wall. W. Farnsworth Fowle, Class of 1937, reported a mid-WW II conversation with the late Professor Richard Newhall to the effect that, if anything happened to him because of the war, he wouldn't want to be listed on the Chapel wall if Carter weren't there as well. According to Fowle, Newhall replied that he would "take care of it." Currently in storage until the new library is finished in 2014, the documents developed by

Ozzie Wyckoff, Class of 1914, for the 1946 Chapel dedication may add further light on the matter.

Acknowledgments

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Nicholas H. Wright, Class of 1957
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