

Stuart Christie obituary

Anarchist who was jailed in Spain for an attempt to assassinate Franco and later acquitted of being a member of the Angry Brigade

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In 1964 a dashing, long-haired 18-year-old British anarchist, Stuart Christie, faced the possibility of the death penalty in Madrid for his role in a plot to assassinate General Franco, the Spanish dictator.

A man of great charm, warmth and wit, Christie, who has died of cancer aged 74, got away with a 20-year prison sentence and was eventually released after less than four years, only to find himself in prison several years later in Britain after being accused of being a member of the Angry Brigade, a group responsible for a series of explosions in London in the early 1970s. On that occasion he was acquitted, and afterwards he went on to become a leading writer and publisher of anarchist literature, as well as the author of a highly entertaining memoir, *Granny Made Me an Anarchist*.

Christie's Franco-related mission was to deliver explosives to Madrid for an attempt to blow up the Spanish leader while he attended a football match at the city's Bernabéu stadium. Telling his family that he was going grape-picking in France, he went first to Paris, where it turned out that the only French he knew, to the amusement of his anarchist hosts, was "*Zut, alors!*"

There he was given explosives and furnished with instructions on how to make himself known to his contact by wearing a bandage on his hand. As his knowledge of Spanish was even more limited than his French, he had to be taught a phrase - *me duele la mano* (my hand hurts) - as a coded response to his contact.

Having been kitted out in Paris, Christie began to hitchhike south with the explosives wrapped around his body and wearing a kilt as an aid to getting lifts. His attire later led to reports in the Argentinian press that the man who tried to assassinate Franco was a "Scottish transvestite".



Press handout photo of Stuart Christie, aged 18, in 1964, after he had been detained by the Spanish police for carrying explosives

Once he arrived in Madrid, however, it turned out that Christie's group had been infiltrated, and he was arrested along with his Spanish contact, Fernando Carballo. After being forced to watch Carballo being tortured, Christie signed a confession. Convicted of "banditry and terrorism" after a brief trial in a military court, he faced the possibility of execution by garotte, but was instead given the 20-year jail term. His sentence prompted international protests, including from Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertrand Russell.

In the notorious Carabanchel prison in Madrid, Christie was warmly welcomed on to the political wing by fellow anarchists and republicans, who admired his courage for their cause.

In jail he studied for A-levels in history, English and Spanish, and worked as a nurse. His mother wrote regularly to Franco to ask for clemency, and the Spanish authorities, noting "her dignity and motherly concern", released him after just under four years. "The most beneficial thing was that my arrest provided a focus for what Franco was doing," he said later. "He was trying to pass himself off as an old avuncular gentleman on a white charger while in fact he had all these political prisoners, thousands of whom were tortured and some killed."

Four years after returning to London in 1968 Christie, while working as a gas fitter, was arrested on suspicion of being a member of the Angry Brigade, a libertarian group accused of carrying out explosions aimed at Edward Heath's government. At the Old Bailey trial of the so-called Stoke

Newington Eight in 1972 Christie told the jury that the police had planted two detonators on him and he was acquitted, while four co-defendants were convicted and jailed. Although Christie knew some of those involved in the Angry Brigade, he was arrested mainly because of his reputation.

Christie was born in the Partick area of Glasgow, the son of Albert, a trawlerman from Aberdeenshire, and Olive (nee Ring), a hairdresser. When he was six his father left home, and as a result he was brought up in part by his grandfather and by his redoubtable grandmother, Agnes Ring, in Ardrossan, Arran and then Blantyre.

After leaving Calder Street school in Blantyre in 1961 he worked briefly as an apprentice in a Glasgow dental laboratory, where he became the union representative. He then joined the Labour Party Young Socialists but became disillusioned by the fact that Labour activists went out canvassing wearing Rangers scarves to secure the Protestant vote. He tore up his membership card and found his political home with the Glasgow Federation of Anarchists.

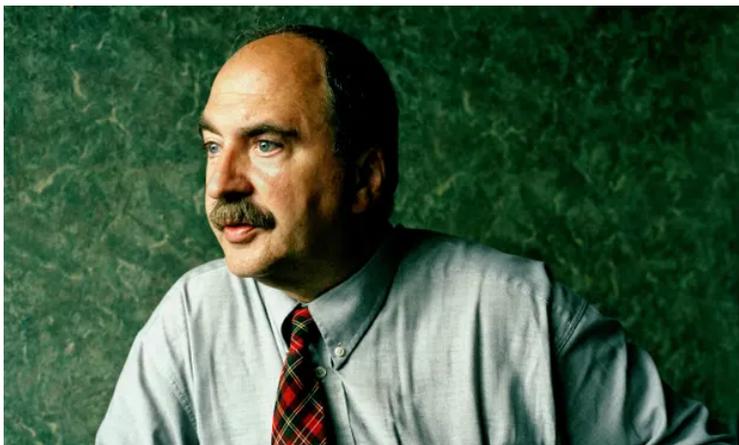
Nuclear disarmament was a major political issue in the early 1960s, highlighted in Scotland by the siting of American Polaris nuclear submarines at the Holy Loch near the Firth of Clyde, and Christie became an active member of the Scottish Committee of 100, which was dedicated to their removal.

At the same time, with growing evidence of Franco's anarchist opponents being jailed, tortured and killed in Spain, political events in that country also became a focus of his attention. A move in 1964 to London, where he found work as a sheet-metal apprentice and on an ironmongery stall, led to his meeting up with Spanish anarchist exiles. Deciding that "I had to do more than just demonstrate and leaflet", he offered his services and was soon recruited to smuggle explosives into Madrid.

Once back in the UK after his capture and imprisonment, he campaigned for the discharge of many of his fellow Spanish prisoners, offering them a home in exile in London if they were released. One of these was Miguel García, with whom Christie would later launch the Centro Iberico and International Libertarian Centre in London.

On his return to London in 1968, Christie had met Brenda Earl, a typist and later a teacher, who was also committed to the anti-Francoist cause and who would shortly become his wife. In 1970, with his friend the veteran anarchist Albert Meltzer, he wrote *The Floodgates of Anarchy*, the first of many books, and two years later came the Angry Brigade trial.

In 1974, after the kidnapping in Paris of a Francoist banker, a special branch officer advised Christie and Brenda to leave their home in London for their own safety. They went first to Honley, in West Yorkshire, and then to Sanday in Orkney, where their daughter, Branwen, was born. There they ran the Cienfuegos Press, which became a major publisher of anarchist literature, and a radical paper, *Free-Winged Eagle*.



Stuart Christie in 2015. Photograph: Eamonn McCabe/The Guardian

After seven years in Orkney they moved to Cambridge and then to Hastings in East Sussex, where Christie edited the Hastings Trawler and started the Anarchist Film Channel in 2006. “Hollywood and the mainstream film industry tends to depict anarchists as flaky, obsessive, rabid, demonic, repellent stereotypes - such as Hitchcock’s *The Secret Agent* or *The Man Who Knew Too Much*,” he explained at the time. He took on editorial work in London as a subeditor for the magazine *Media Week*, and on the British edition of *Pravda* and the English language version of the Russian weekly *Argumenty i Fakty*.

Granny Made Me an Anarchist, published in 2004, explained that he had learned as a boy from his grandmother that “we are not bystanders to life.” The book was as funny, perceptive and self-deprecating as the man himself. He also wrote *¡Pistoleros! The Chronicles of Farquar McHarg*, a trilogy (2009-12) about a fictional Scottish anarchist born in 1900 who became involved in the Spanish civil war. A quotation at the front of the book, from Victor Serge’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, summed up his own beliefs: “Anarchism demanded, before anything else, harmony between deeds and words.”

Brenda died in 2019. Christie is survived by Branwen, two granddaughters, Merri and Mo, and his half-sister, Olivia.

. Stuart Christie, anarchist, writer and publisher, born 10 July 1946; died 15 August 2020

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