

## **Researching transnational activist lives: Irish Buddhists and the British Empire**

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### **Abstract**

*This research note explores some methodological challenges arising from biographical research on early Irish Buddhists in the colonial period. It briefly situates the role of such figures in relation to Asian anti-colonial movements and highlights the research challenges posed by multiple languages and countries, the variable preservation and digitisation of different kinds of sources, and the polarisation provoked by such figures. Practical solutions include international collaboration, digitisation, and a combination of quasi-philological precision and quasi-ethnographic understanding. The note highlights three relevant findings: a relativisation of the importance of organisations, a greater appreciation of the meanings of failure, and a historical materialist approach to possibility.*

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For generations which have learned to take the problem of standpoint seriously, biography presents two major problems. Firstly, with relatively few exceptions the biographer is unlikely to have had as interesting a life as their subject; in other words, they are likely to be researching someone who has been blessed or cursed with a more dramatic and challenging set of experiences and difficulties around the very things (political activism, for example) which make their life worth writing about. Secondly – if to a lesser extent – there is often a sharp difference in more narrowly demographic experience: the subject has often experienced more generations, bereavements and so on than the biographer. Few biographers of Marx, for example, can have any real sense of what it means to have lost four children in childhood and to see another die as an adult.

At the most intimate level, where the biographer seeks to understand and interpret the choices and actions of their subject, this should inject a note of caution: as EP Thompson famously put it, “they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not” (1963: 13). In particular, in an age

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where it is not only conservative writers who seek to reduce political lives to questions of ethics and personality imagined in the narrowest of terms, it might be wondered how many biographers (or for that matter readers) can really claim the right to judge in this way.

This problem is perhaps inherent in biography, which claims attention precisely because it handles significant aspects of the past through the frame of an individual life, and so to seek a picture of the person (standing in for this wider perspective) in their actions and personality as we (think we can) understand and assess them. This problem is particularly acute in social movement biography, where the subject is almost by definition controversial, their experiences usually extraordinary, and the judgement on the individual acts as a synecdoche for judgement on the movement, organisation or political tradition. This problem is, I think, a constitutive one which should not stop us from writing or reading biography, but should be remembered as an ironic aspect of the whole enterprise. All too often the writer at their desk and the reader in their armchair are far from having walked a hard mile in the cheap shoes of their subjects, let alone – as with Dhammaloka – crossed Asia barefoot.

### **Irish Buddhists, religion and anti-colonialism**

In this research note I discuss some methodological issues arising out of the study of early Irish Buddhists. Over the past seven years I have worked with a series of colleagues internationally on four such figures. With Alicia Turner, Brian Bocking and many others I have worked on the figure of U Dhammaloka (?Laurence Carroll, ?1856-?1913), a Dublin-born hobo, sailor and finally Buddhist monk whose atheist polemics against missionary Christianity challenged the imperial order across Buddhist Asia. With Brian Bocking and Yoshinaga Shin'ichi I have researched Captain Charles Pfoundes (1840 – 1907) – sailor, interpreter, Japanologist and founder of the first Buddhist mission to the west (London, 1889-92). With Mihirini Sirisena I have researched John Bowles Daly (?1844-?1916) – journalist, historian and educational reformer who played a significant role in the development of modern Buddhist education in Ceylon against the dominant Christian schools. Lastly, with Margery Reynolds I have studied Vivian Butler Burke (?1881 – 1937), an Irish-American Republican, correspondent of Romain Rolland, Tucholsky, Tagore and Gandhi, and founder of the first Buddhist centre in Ireland<sup>2</sup>.

I should probably explain for *Interface* readers what this idiosyncratic collection of apparent eccentrics has to do with social movements. In the later nineteenth

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<sup>2</sup> The site <http://dhammalokaproject.wordpress.com> gathers together links to the various parts of this research.

and early twentieth century, with a majority of the world under imperial rule, there was a widespread tendency for religion and ethnicity (often intertwined) to become more important politically – in the construction of colonial racial hierarchies, in the definition of legal and administrative arrangements, and in the justification of empire itself – than they had been in the preceding period. In Asia, where the majority of the world’s population lived and live, and in the British empire in particular, this tendency was a pronounced one: borders were constructed, and reorganised, in ways which had important implications for later nation-state formation; elaborate racial hierarchies were constructed; and missionary Christianity became an important practical and symbolic part of the colonial enterprise in new ways.

One of the most important historical facts of the twentieth century – the formation of a majority of today’s nation-states out of the ruins of empire – was foreshadowed by a series of elite and popular movements in opposition to different aspects of colonial rule, or to the thing itself. In this context Ireland, with partial independence in the early 1920s, found itself in what today appears an unlikely homology with Asian countries – so that Burmese nationalists translated the accounts of Irish guerrilla fighters, for example. Anti-colonial movements took many forms, but one of the most common was that of religious revival, from Irish Catholicism via Gandhi’s Hinduism to the Boxer rebellion.

As Daniel O’Connell’s followers had learned in the 1820s and 1830s, there was much to be said for organising behind a religious banner. In this period the colonial power could not simply be seen to repress “native” religion, and any intervention ran the risk of creating a new rallying cause which could offer popular support for urban nationalist elites. However, the colonial power’s own semi-identification with religion (itself in part a product of the growing need to gain popular support at home for empire abroad in a period of partial democratisation) meant that the (in principle) legitimate articulation of local religion – and in particular polemics against conversion, or against Christianity – could readily be understood in political terms. This was more than convenient in circumstances where open treason or sedition was a very risky activity. Thus a grey zone was created in which a skilful activist like Dhammaloka could say everything they needed to say, gaining popular support both when they said it and if the authorities intervened<sup>3</sup>.

In much of Asia – which was far more religiously complex than we now grasp – Buddhism offered a particularly powerful point of reference. It was unarguably older than Christianity, had successfully staked its claim to be a world religion, and held significant prestige among educated audiences globally for its

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<sup>3</sup> In other cases, such as the liberal Home Ruler Daly, their Buddhist affiliation put western participants in a more radical situation within Ceylonese politics than they would probably have chosen independently.

philosophical articulation and artistic heritage. More importantly, it could be credibly presented as a *pan-Asian* religion, with long roots in many countries, not least the few uncolonised Asian states (Siam / Thailand, Japan, and until 1904 Tibet). As also with global Islam in this period, it presented the possibility of a revival spanning much of Asia and thus matching the western empires or the spread of Christianity in ambition. Finally, this revival enabled the construction of new kinds of collective *lay* organising geared towards the politics of the colonial age<sup>4</sup>.

The Irish Buddhist lives I have been researching take their place in this context. Empire, and a new intensification of capitalist relationships and communication, made travel much more accessible and enabled the construction of new kinds of international religious and political organisations structured around international branches and conferences and the publication and exchange of periodicals. Irish emigration – always high but massively increased since the Famine of the 1840s – combined with the experience of colonial and religious conflict in Ireland to produce a number of figures who found themselves at home in, and contributed to, the pan-Asian Buddhist revival of the period. Their political and religious positions were diverse but one important feature is that all were involved in *Asian*-led organisations of different kinds and transgressed the racial and religious boundaries of the high colonial period.

### **The difficulties of writing transnational activist biography**

Above I have highlighted the difficulties for present-day biographers, with their own standpoints, of adequately assessing their subjects. One obvious corrective to this is to place multiple, broadly comparable, lives side by side so that we are at least comparing like with like. In this respect, working on the four biographical projects mentioned above (often concurrently) has been a very helpful experience, as has the prior existence of biographies of figures bordering my concerns, such as the Irish Buddhist sympathiser, writer and Japanophile Lafcadio Hearn / Koizumi Yakumo [1850 – 1904; Murray 1993, Tweed 2000] and the world's first female-to-male transsexual by plastic surgery, the doctor, theorist of sexual identity and – in the post-independence period - Buddhist monk Michael Dillon [1915 – 1962; Hodgkinson 1989, Kennedy 2007].

In my *Buddhism and Ireland* (2013) I was also able to work on the wider context, exploring the various world-systemic relationships that connected Buddhism's Asian heartlands with Ireland in different periods and that brought

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<sup>4</sup> To avoid misunderstandings, this is not intended as any kind of justification of religion as such, but rather to observe that what we now call social movements often took a religious form in the high colonial and post-colonial period, and that there are historical reasons for this.

Irish people to Buddhist Asia, or Asian Buddhists to Ireland. The 4 biographies discussed here grew out of this project, but I came across many other figures glimpsed more fleetingly – in stray newspaper mentions and memoirs, in census data, in organisational documents and distribution lists. It was also possible to discover how contemporaries viewed Irish Buddhists – in Kipling’s best-selling *Kim* (1900-1) or the now-forgotten *Road to Mandalay* (1917), both of which tied their imagined heroes to the wider history of Irish soldiers’ children and deserters in Asia – and even in the 1936 ordination in Ceylon of a Buddhist monk who held false Irish papers but was in fact a Jew from Berlin (Cox 2013: 256). All of this makes it possible to set the individual life in much wider context and, I hope, to assess it more fairly.

Studying transnational activists is never going to be a simple project, even if it is in my experience a hugely rewarding one. Firstly and most obviously, transnationality is likely to imply the need for multiple languages and the ability to master the libraries and archives of multiple different countries – if not for our subject’s own writings and records (which are often extensive), then certainly to see the traces they left in official records, newspapers and periodicals, and other people’s reminiscences and photographs.

For activists in this period in Asia, matters are more complex still, in that colonial-language and establishment records are far more likely to have survived and to be accessible (today particularly through digitisation) than are the records of movement organisations and those in local languages. There may also be a similar contrast between high-status local languages and those of ethnic minorities and diaspora networks. Thus it is a very rare pleasure when for Dhammaloka’s 1909 tour of Ceylon we were able to set side by side several of his speeches (in Sinhalese translation), the (English-language) diaries of the tour organiser, the Sri Lankan nationalist Anagarika Dharmapala, critical commentary from the Catholic press and a diary entry showing the interest of the colonial state’s embryonic intelligence structure (Sirisena 2016): yet we can still not be certain why the tour was not completed.

As this suggests, sources for movements are almost inevitably strongly polarised, presenting apparent facts (some of them highly doubtful) with a primary eye to convincing other audiences who had no way of immediately verifying particular claims and may have been more or less receptive to particular presentations of reality. The tabloid representation of plebeian, foreign, religiously unorthodox and politically suspect individuals has a long history, and it is not for nothing that *Kim* and *Mandalay* could use such figures.

More typically, sources are very unevenly preserved, not only along these linguistic and political dimensions but also as between different countries: it is a rare privilege to be able to compare like with like. More commonly, we have to attempt to estimate the extent and likely significance of what has *not* survived –

a particularly challenging historical task, but not one that can sensibly be avoided. Much of the evidence is simply fragmentary, and “random access” in nature: not in any official source, structured archive or well-known organisation but discovered accidentally, sent in by friends or strangers, or initially overlooked and only acquiring significance in the light of some subsequently-discovered fact.

### **Some practical solutions**

There are, thankfully, some relatively straightforward ways of handling some of these difficulties. The most obvious one is international collaboration: not only because no one individual is likely to have the linguistic and archival skills necessary to track a transnational activist across their various contexts, but also because so many different *academic* kinds of expertise – political, religious, cultural – are often required to understand this moving between worlds; and, most fundamentally perhaps, because two or three heads are much better than one in making sense of and assessing the wide range of different kinds of evidence that can more easily be gathered than understood.

In particular, memory and meaning become major challenges: memory because of the quantity of quite separate kinds of information which are collected (and risk being quickly forgotten), and meaning because our ability to remember is often tied up precisely with our situating a particular fact in a given context. There is a constant tendency to try to identify meaning in what may in fact be less significant than we think, and to relate it to other things – whether existing frameworks of interpretation which we are satisfied with or other problematic data for which we are also seeking a context. Dialogue with other researchers is helpful both for minimising information loss but also for holding our interpretations lightly.

The digitisation of data is, perhaps, the single fact which has both transformed this field and made some kinds of research possible in ways that were simply unavailable twenty years previously. If a transnational activist is genuinely forgotten – if they do not form part of the official history of a well-known organisation or tradition – how are we to know that they were there at all? Digitisation in all its forms – of out-of-copyright books, of extensive newspaper databases, of photographs, of texts like the organisational diaries of Col. Olcott, Theosophist and Buddhist activist across Asia – offers an easy way to check both how extensive the record of any individual is and if they have been researched before from some other angle. This is decidedly imperfect but still far better than reliance on what is already known within the canon of (for example) an academic discipline, a national Left, or an official religious history. At the same time, we are routinely faced with the problem of names: false names

(Dhammaloka had at least five), religious names (for radical movements of the period activist or code names were also common), the representation of names from one language or alphabet in another, and for that matter simple misspellings or OCR failures.

A necessary ability, and one common to historiography in general, is that of reading facts backwards: of working backwards, for example, from the fact that a writer decided to devote column inches to attacking our subject, to the question of whether this is because our subject was sufficiently prominent to be worth attacking, or because although relatively unimportant they could be turned into a useful symbol of something wider (perhaps legitimating a call for money to support missionary activity, or substantiating the demand for greater repressive measures), or for that matter because there was some personal animus at play. In other words, the most interesting fact is often not what a given author wants to tell us explicitly; but it can take time for the researcher to become familiar with, for example, the peculiarities of the colonial press, with its cut-and-paste plagiarism, its need to fill column inches, and its reliance on an almost gossipy sense of what counted as news within a narrowly-defined social world.

Our own biographies can be a source of strength here: a classic case, to return to EP Thompson, is his commentary on the minutes of the London Swedenborgian church from which William Blake and his wife were excluded following a bitter conflict (1993: ch 8). Thompson, as a past member of the Communist Party, had a much sharper sense than many of what an organisational leadership might be up to with the minute book, and how to spot this.

In the widest sense, though, it seems to me that we need to try and combine two things. One is an almost philological exactitude: we need to understand organisational rules, official ideology, the genealogy of splits and so on in order not to read vaguely but to situate what is being said within a precise context. With the relative decline of formal political and religious organisations today, this sort of sharp specificity may need more active cultivation.

However – and nobody would be more aware of this than an international activist – we need the ethnographic understanding that these things did not mean the same thing in different places. The *vinaya* may officially govern the behaviour of Buddhist monks, but actual expectations are historically and locally specific; self-proclaimed Marxists may make reference to *Capital*, but they take very different things from it; the meanings ascribed to a particular split at the time do not necessarily tell us what happened next. This double discipline, “philological” and “ethnographic”, is again perhaps best handled through collaboration.

## **Social movement findings from Irish Buddhist lives**

### **Relativising the importance of the organisation**

This piece is intended as an exploration of research methods in transnational activist lives. Many of the findings from the projects discussed here are specific to the individuals concerned, or to the wider fields of the Buddhist revival in Asia – and take up a great deal of space in the work devoted to those findings. Nevertheless a few points may be worth highlighting for readers of *Interface*.

One is that when we look at the individual level, we often find far greater agency – and mobility – than a focus on a single organisation in a single place would suggest. From the latter perspective, we may see dissenters or drifters. From another perspective, however, we see what Elizabeth Humphrys (2013: 358) calls movement networkers: the people who at a personal level kept networks alive, made links, and gave individual struggles in individual places a wider relevance.

Similarly, this perspective is often unkind to organisations, not only in their often tense or problematic relationship to individuals, but also as regards wider social movements and less formal networks. It is not obvious, of course, which of these is more important: however (as with individual vs organisation or mobile vs place-bound), our own choice of method and subject often presumes the primacy of one over the other. It is worth remembering this and not becoming unconscious prisoners of the contingencies of our discipline, data sources or political commitment. In this sense, relating biographies to one another and to study of the wider context and organisational histories is a way to ask more freely which of these seems to be dominant, or which different areas are more strongly shaped by which kinds of processes.

A perspective which often stands out in activist biography is that of movement *milieux*: the counter-cultures (Piotrowski 2013), alternative scenes (Creasap 2012), friendship contexts (Gandhi 2006), spaces of cross-mobilisation and so on which in specific times and places bridge what from the outside may seem different movements, organisations, issues, ideologies or social groups. It is often such *milieux* which enable the construction of new organisations or within which movement entrepreneurs can attempt to launch new themes and directions. Such spaces certainly enable ideological and political experimentation; they also enable individuals to shift track, be recruited, find allies and so on.



## **The significance of failure**

Experimentation implies failure: the rhetoric of “forgotten” figures often means fairly straightforwardly that they do not today hold a privileged position in the genealogies and origin stories which are repeated within particular organisations or movements. At times this is because they did hold such positions in their own time but were subsequently marginalised in the retelling; more interestingly, it is often because the things they tried did not work, or worked in their own time but did not survive into the present. Activist rhetorics sometimes fetishise particular tactics or ways of organising as almost universally applicable, while positivist forms of social science often wind up in a similar place, in both cases abstracting from the complexities of situations which activists themselves, like their opponents, were trying to reshape.

More broadly, I want to suggest, biography helps us to correct the perspective in which success should be almost a normal state of affairs for social movements. Successful and innovative radical activists – and in their own day all the figures discussed here were this to some extent – necessarily combine a degree of stubborn refusal of everyday reality (the ability to conceive of a completely different world, or to imagine a very different way of going about things) with a certain kind of opportunism (the ability to see possibilities where others see nothing of the sort). Consequently they are inveterate experimenters, and as might be expected the number of times they fall flat on their face is relatively high compared to the number of times they strike gold. Even when they do strike gold, what works at the time (even what is famous or notorious) is not necessarily the same as what survives, for a very wide range of reasons.

Biographical research constantly discovers experimentations which went nowhere, organisations and projects which had a real impact in their own time but have not been incorporated into a present-day genealogy, and the like. Failure is extremely interesting, and not only from the instrumental perspective in which we want to get it right, or at least better. It also shows us what outcomes could realistically be conceived, or expected, at a particular point in time, avoiding Thompson’s “enormous condescension of posterity”.

Two examples may serve. One is that it was entirely reasonable – up to a certain historical point – to assume that equal votes would lead to an equalisation of wealth, or that national independence would transform the economic life of the new states. There is a real and necessary learning process in such cases: some things seem so obvious that they have to be tried before any significant number of people can not only see that they do not bring the expected results, but also understand why things do not pan out that way. At the time, however, this very obviousness can mean that people rarely explain why they are persistently pursuing what hindsight would see as an obvious red herring.

Secondly, at the turn of the twentieth century both Christian missionaries and Buddhists seem to have genuinely believed that extensive preaching and polemic, the construction of Young Men's Christian or Buddhist Associations (the Buddhist ones being modelled on the Christian) and so on were effective tools for conversion. In retrospect, it is much clearer both how far material and political interests played a role in decisions to convert or mobilise (to access education or affiliate with a rising ethnic group, for example) – and how far receptivity to missionaries or support for anti-colonial religious revival was shaped by membership of locally subaltern or dominant ethnicities respectively.

As with the disappointments of electoral democracy or national independence, it is not that such things were completely hidden from every contemporary or inaccessible to any kind of research – it is rather that for those who had not made an in-depth study of the matter, or who were new and enthusiastic, it was *then* reasonable enough to start from the assumption that a particular kind of organising was what was needed. The ability to break from these assumptions, or to find effective ways of working, was a rare achievement.

The implications for social movements are not hard to see: today, good activist theory and good research are both likely to recognise to some extent how innovative movement actors are starting from socially or locally specific ways of doing things, familiar cultural frameworks and the political models which are available to them. At the same time we do not often specify as clearly as we might how activists can better bridge the gap between the world as it is in this sense, the world as we believe it to be and the world as we would like it to be. In the lives I have studied, effectiveness often appears as a combination of comparative perspectives from one's own transnational experience and reading, together with effectively engaging with and listening to the Asian actors and networks whose practical support was central to the survival and propagation of projects which on paper appear as those of Irish Buddhists. These local actors and networks, even though they often take a backstage in the official Anglophone press that forms a central part of the surviving record, had their own history of experimentation and failure which no doubt contributed massively to shaping the possibility for these successes.

Biographical study, perhaps, can help us become more relaxed about the likelihood or even the necessity of repeated failures and simultaneously clearer about how to keep going despite this, to a new project which might surprise us with its success – and how to learn more effectively from others.

## **Conclusion: rethinking possibility**

Thompson's preface to *Making of the English Working Class*, quoted at the start, rightly discusses the need to stand outside the triumphal and teleological narratives of the particular organisational lineages which have survived to the present day, and to recognise in these past voices alternative possibilities, both good and bad. The preface bears reading and rereading, but the point is harder to take on board in practice than it is to restate.

From a Marxist perspective, one of the key processes involved in the period I am researching is the changing meaning of particular categories. Nation, ethnic group and race; religion, atheism, morals, philosophy, mythology, literature; revival, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism – all these categories are being fought over, not only verbally but in organisational practice and in the complex and diverse shaping of anti-colonial struggles across the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth century in Asia.

In this sense the fact that Dhammaloka was able to use radical atheist (free-thinking, in the language of the day) arguments against Christianity and on behalf of Buddhism is not irrelevant. Nor is the fact that we have Irish individuals closely involved in Asian processes of primarily national cultural and religious reassertion which would lead to the end of empires – and would in this sense be disavowed by the later architects of Japan's "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere" or by today's Buddhist nationalists in Sri Lanka or Burma. Nor, for that matter, is it irrelevant that we find the latter's contemporaries in Ireland resisting the definition of Irish politics as being "really" about Catholic vs Protestant and the definition of Irish religion as being "really" about nationhood, and turning to Buddhism as an escape from all this.

To take an example from a different sphere: Alf Nilsen and I (2014: 203) have argued that much Marxist discussion of "the party" is vitiated by the implicit assumption that "party" meant the same thing when the *Manifesto* was written, at the heyday of the SPD, in 1917, under Stalin, in the sectarian groupuscules of the 1960s and 1970s or in the debates around Podemos, Syriza and Momentum today – an assumption innocent of any real historical materialism (see Barker 2001 for a more nuanced approach).

The same, of course, is true for the widely varied kinds of thing that can be described with the category "social movement"; and one of the points of *Interface* is to enable a greater dialogue between these different kinds of realities and the different ways in which activists and researchers conceptualise them: not to mention contributing to the possibility that actually-existing movements can become more, and other, than they are at present.

Activist biography can help us develop a stronger sense of possibility in this sort of perspective: it is not that past radicals were necessarily wrong in terms of an

objectively-available structure of the world, which they failed to grasp correctly (though they were often wrong). It is at least as true to say that they lost the struggle to shape the future – and that, often in the countries under discussion here, the new society bore the birthmarks of the old in ways that have led to other people having to fight for the same kinds of substance in different ways, as William Morris put it. If this is nonetheless defeat, it is a less disempowering kind than others, and one which licences us to fight our own battles today – with no guarantees of success but perhaps free of the sense that no matter what we do, some hidden hand will sweep our efforts away.

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Laurence Cox has written, co-written or co-edited (with Brian Bocking, Alicia Turner and others) various books, special issues, articles and chapters exploring early western involvement in the pan-Asian Buddhist Revival of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He can be contacted at [laurence.cox AT nuim.ie](mailto:laurence.cox@nuim.ie)