

Thinking beyond the island: Buddhism, Ireland and method in the study of religions

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Abstract

An “Irish Buddhist” was often presented in old newspapers as an oxymoron, but our research (with Alicia Turner, Yoshinaga Shin’ichi and others) on the unexpectedly long history of Buddhism and Ireland has unearthed some fascinating dimensions in the broader study of religions and Ireland. Stepping beyond traditional discourses, we have found Irish Buddhists involved in Asian religious change, migrants bringing new religions to Ireland and people in Ireland rejecting the Catholic/Protestant binary. We have also found the first (1889) Buddhist mission to Europe (London) and a forgotten early 1900s Irish Buddhist challenge to colonial missionary Christianity in South & Southeast Asia. Our research has driven us to explore new methods – in particular using digital humanities to reconstruct forgotten figures and fostering developing scholarly networks to study translocal lives. This chapter situates our own discoveries among expanding new research initiatives on Ireland and religions, and highlights the significance of these research projects for the academic study of religions throughout the island of Ireland and beyond.

Introduction

Historically ‘Irish’ and ‘Buddhist’ have seldom gone together. Most commonly the phrase appears as an oxymoron or, more interestingly, as a thought experiment to represent a position *outside* the ‘Protestant-Catholic’ binary within which not just Irish religion but ‘Ireland’ and ‘Irishness’ have been widely understood. Thus, in 1906, the President of what is today University College Cork – arguing for Catholic control of the National University – wrote

If the Grand Lama and his followers could establish a large colony in Ireland tomorrow, it is not improbable that in the course of a year or so they would be conceded a University adapted to the religion of Buddhists (Cox 2013, p. 166).

At the other end of Eurasia, in India and Burma, an ‘Irish Buddhist’ stood for something rather different. Rudyard Kipling’s best-selling novel *Kim* (1900) and Bithia Croker’s *Road to Mandalay* (1917) present respectively the son of an Irish soldier (and an Indian woman) following a Tibetan Buddhist guru, and a part-Irish deserter who has ordained as a Burmese monk. The uneasy attraction for readers in

these cases came from the awareness that Buddhism connected many of the British Empire's colonies in Asia – and that the Irish constituted a large proportion of the military whose job was to hold those colonies down. What might happen, even in fantasy, if the two were to join hands?

Empire, of course, produced both these situations. The academic study of religions has long discussed the construction of 'world religions' as forms through which colonialism categorised its subjects and through which those subjects staked claims for recognition on a world scale. This process led – in Ireland as in much of Asia – to the construction of nation-states defined around relationships between 'the nation' and 'religion'. At the same time as 'Buddhism' was being articulated at the end of the nineteenth century as a single thing on a world stage – including by Irish figures such as U Dhammaloka, Charles Pfoundes, Lafcadio Hearn or John Bowles Daly – religion had become central to Irish popular politics, and in ways that made Irish engagement with 'Buddhism' qualitatively different to what happened in, for example, North America or Britain. For example, in sharp contrast to the US and UK, Irish Theosophy had little use for Buddhism (Cox 2013, ch.4).

Buddhism and the study of religions in Ireland

The multiple meanings of 'Irish Buddhist' noted above are shaped by this wider religious history; and until very recently *actual* Irish engagement with Buddhism has responded to the same situation: for example, presenting Buddhism as tolerant where dominant Irish Christianities were anything but; or as peaceful in contrast to the long history of sectarian violence. More subtle versions include the assertions that Buddhism is not about adherence to religious dogma, or about blind obedience to a religious institution or about bringing up children in a religion understood as a form of ethnic membership.

These are of course assertions to be understood as countering the dominant (ethnic, confessional and political) meanings of religion on the island – or as asserting Buddhism as 'not religious'. Previously these were more 'philosophical' and now perhaps more 'spiritual', hand in hand with the shifting emphasis from Buddhist *ideas* to Buddhist *practices*. More interestingly perhaps, Buddhism has also meant an engagement with a wider world of thought and culture beyond that defined by the 'Abrahamic' religions generally. As Asian Buddhists have arrived in Ireland, with their own complex histories, this picture becomes further complicated. From the point of view of the study of religions, of course, this means that the intersection between Ireland and Buddhism is a particularly productive and creative one for thinking about the changing and contested meanings of 'religion' and 'religions'.

Because of the institutional power of the Irish churches, the terrain of religious studies has long been occupied by theologians – until recently still mainly concerned with training priests, and now seeking ways to reinvest their cultural capital. In many universities the old Catholic philosophical curriculum (from Aristotle to Aquinas) still

dominates with little understanding or interest in Asian philosophy.¹ Irish history and sociology too tend to take 'religion' for granted in terms of its dominant meanings on the island. The study of Buddhism necessarily asks broader questions, in many ways, among them questions about what it means to engage with or 'belong to' 'a religion' such as Buddhism in a context of religious innovation and diversity. As just one illustration, Irish healthcare has always been dominated by religious organisations, with fixed rules for how Catholics and Protestants should be treated. Cox remembers the challenges of contributing to an Irish Health Service Executive document whose editors desperately wanted to be able to tell nurses and doctors that 'Buddhists want X, and do Y' when receiving health care. The editors struggled with the proposition that it might be better to *ask* the patient rather than seek a religious professional who would say what the patient *ought* to want, based on their binary ethno-religious identity.

From 2008 onwards Bocking and his colleagues developed the first non-confessional department for the study of religions on the island. This logically started with study of terrain which was not already over-contested by theologians and which represented and reflected a 'new Ireland' which is far more culturally diverse than in the 20th century, more inclined to engage in religious innovation and increasingly confident in acknowledging the realities of Ireland's history while part of the British Empire – including deep but forgotten bonds with Asia and discarded alternative visions of a free Ireland's future. Specialists in Buddhism, Islam, Orthodox and African Christianities, Indian and indigenous religions etc. represented the new 'Religions and Global Diversity' programme and its postgraduate branches, while the founding of ISASR (the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions) and its annual conferences brought in many of the scholars of 'Ireland's New Religious Movements' (Cosgrove et al. 2011).

The Irish past has of course long been contested, with a centuries-long conflict between native historiographical traditions tied to the Irish Catholic church and the vanished Gaelic aristocracy on the one hand, and on the other a colonial/Whig history which saw the British empire as civilising Ireland. This gave way in the late 19th and early 20th century to the new kind of nationalist historiography spreading across Europe – and in turn Asia - which linked claims to geographical, ethnic and cultural uniqueness with the right to sovereignty. Towards the end of the twentieth century, the violent conflicts over the status of Northern Ireland, as well as revived Left and women's movements, saw a diversification of narratives of Irish culture and history. These ranged from attempts to remember and celebrate – rather than deny or decry – Irish involvement in Empire, to more interesting approaches such as thinking Ireland in post-colonial terms and critiquing its racist past and present. These debates continue, on an island where history, empire and religion are never far away.

The Irish study of Buddhism takes its place in this context, offering a way to understand in a global perspective both Irish collusion in the imperial (and Christian missionary) enterprise of the colonial period and Irish religious solidarity with the pan-Asian 'Buddhist revival' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

¹ UCC (University College Cork) is perhaps a significant exception, with Asian philosophy in the curriculum since the 2008 appointment of Graham Parkes and subsequently Adam Loughnane.

(Turner, Cox & Bocking 2020, pp. 9-14). 'At home', it enables an exploration of religiously-shaped dissent from the dominant meanings of 'religion' as well as insights into many of the different 'new Irish' communities (as well as some new religious movements) and into how Irish culture is engaging – or failing to engage – with a context which is, once again, global rather than insular.

Research on Buddhism and Ireland

Academic research on the encounter between Buddhism and Ireland began with Laurence Cox's research for *Buddhism and Ireland* (2013),² developing his previous work on Irish social movements and counter-cultures. In November 2009, Cox and others organised at Maynooth University the first ever Irish conference on the topic of 'Alternative Spiritualities, New Religious Movements and the New Age in Ireland', which saw a first presentation of his own research on Irish Buddhism as well as a paper by John L. Murphy (Westcliff University, California) on the invention of 'Celtic Buddhism', and eleven other papers which referred in some way to Buddhism, often in the context of the Irish 'New Age' (Cox 2010; Cosgrove et al. 2011).

At that conference, the two authors of this chapter met for the first time and discovered a shared interest in the then-obscure figure of U Dhammaloka, now the subject of our book co-authored with Burmese Buddhism expert Alicia Turner and published in 2020 as *The Irish Buddhist* (discussed below). Cox had discovered Dhammaloka (alias 'Larry O'Rourke') in European and US radical and freethinking (atheist) journals of the early 1900s and had just published a research note on the topic (Cox 2009), while Bocking, keen to discover research topics that might combine his own academic background with issues relevant to Ireland, discovered a reference by Alexey Kirichenko to an Irish Buddhist in colonial Burma, with a footnote acknowledging Alicia Turner as the source (Kirichenko 2009, p.34). Turner, it transpired, had noted Dhammaloka's presence as an Irish Buddhist called Colvin (another alias) in Burmese newspapers of the early 1900s but knew little of him beyond brief reports of his controversial activities in colonial Rangoon (present day Yangon). Our collaborative research into the elusive Dhammaloka occupied the next ten years, during which time Cox published *Buddhism and Ireland*.

Buddhism and Ireland, appearing in 2013, revealed an extraordinary and unexpected story of archaeological, literary and 'lived' Buddhist connections with Ireland and Irish people over a vast span of time, starting with a bronze Buddha statue from Sri Lanka found in 1886 in a peat bog in Co. Meath – the 'Baltrasna Buddha', probably a product of Roman-era trade links (Cox 2013, pp 45-6) – and continuing up to the present.

For the pre-1850 period, Cox's research focused primarily on reception history. Rather than the traditional cataloguing of 'what Europeans knew about Buddhism' it took the known *material facts* of transmission (e.g. translations of medieval texts, library holdings of early modern texts, scholarship on literacy and printing etc.) to

² Australian theologian John D'Arcy May, who became Director of the Irish School of Ecumenics at Trinity College Dublin in 1987 was already active in Buddhist-Christian theological dialogue circles.

map out as far as possible *when* Irish people came in contact with the specific features of Asian Buddhism transmitted by the Alexandrian and Greco-Bactrian contacts, Mongol-era missions and early modern travellers, *which* Irish people encountered these, and *what can be known* about how they were perceived and used. To the best of our knowledge, and despite widespread interest in the question of 'how Buddhism came to the West', this remains the only published research on the European encounter with Buddhism to attempt such a study for the pre-modern period.

Other than the Baltrasna Buddha, the first demonstrable knowledge of Buddhism in Ireland comes with the development of patristic scholarship in the sixth and seventh century Irish church and hence familiarity with the Church Fathers' descriptions of Indian ascetics. Parallel to this transmission are the 'legendary Alexander' texts, translated into Middle Irish by the tenth or eleventh century, and *Barlaam and Josaphat*, the life of the Buddha transformed into a Christian saint, translated into Irish by 1600. Along with Marco Polo, a series of mostly religious missions to the East generated accounts of the Buddhist world at the time of the Mongol Empire and its successor khanates. *Leabhar Ser Marco Polo (The Book of Sir Marco Polo)* was translated into Irish, probably in Co. Waterford, in 1460. Even more popular, however, were the travels of Odoric of Pordenone from Venice via Sri Lanka to Beijing and back via Tibet (c. 1317-1330), plagiarised in the massively popular *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. *Buddhism and Ireland* reveals continuous Irish familiarity with this story in every century from the fourteenth to the nineteenth. Odoric's assistant, 'brother James of Ireland', is the first attested Irish encounter with living Buddhism (Cox 2013, pp. 45-77).

In the early modern period, the Wars of Religion, plantation (i.e. British settlement of Ireland) and emigration led to a divergence between Irish Protestant and Catholic circuits of knowledge of the Buddhist world, both now increasingly based on contemporary encounters. Religious repression meant that Irish Catholic awareness of the Jesuit encounter with Asian Buddhism was often more developed in the Continental diaspora than on the island, while Protestant circuits of trade and colonisation paid particular attention to sailors' accounts. In a highly-literate island, these narratives circulated not only in expensive editions but in serialised form and probably in inexpensive chapbooks. *Buddhism and Ireland* details what is known of the many copies still surviving and the multi-lingual circuits involved. The remarkable level of popular Irish knowledge of Buddhism attained by this means is epitomised in the work of Ireland's first commercial woman writer, Sydney Owenson, who casually references 'the *dalai lama* of little Thibet' in her successful 1806 novel *The Wild Irish Girl*.

This knowledge only grew during the nineteenth century. When in 1911 a best-selling travel book by the globetrotting American author Harry Franck (Franck 1910) made the name of 'Damalaku' and his fabled journey to Lhasa headline news in America (*Atlanta Constitution*, 30 July 1911) and beyond, it took a Dublin newspaper (the *Sunday Independent* of 6 August 1911) to correct the name to 'Dharmaloka' for its discerning readers. The nineteenth century had seen increasing numbers of Irish people – mostly men - encountering Buddhism in Asia with the spread of the British empire. The single largest contingent among these were soldiers and sailors, but the Irish in Asia included also also colonial officers of every grade, among them

Limerick-born judge and still-renowned scholar of Sikhism Max Arthur Macauliffe (Shackle & Bocking 2017) and Daniel H R Twomey, the Cork-born judge (and grandfather of the anthropologist Mary Douglas) who presided at Dhammaloka's Rangoon appeal hearing in 1911 (Turner, Cox & Bocking 2020, pp. 3-4,). Numerous also were Irish missionaries and traders and a large number of 'poor whites' (particularly but not only ex-soldiers and ex-sailors) living from casual labour and varyingly integrated into the multi-ethnic working-class populations of busy port cities – the kind of world from which Dhammaloka, the Dubliner, came.

As a result, countless Irish families had relatives or acquaintances in Asia, employment prospects in the empire beckoned, and everyday Irish knowledge of Buddhism increased dramatically. For many years, the first thing visitors to the National Museum in Dublin encountered was a *parinibbana* Buddha from Mandalay, captioned "A trophy [*sic*] of Britain's newest colony exhibited to the people of her oldest" and immortalised in Molly Bloom's soliloquy in *Ulysses*; but this was just one of thousands of looted, excavated or purchased Buddhist artefacts and texts in museums and exhibitions, private hands and libraries. With the help of the late Michael Holland, university curator at UCC, we discovered a five-metre Sri Lankan wooden statue of the Buddha in University College Cork's archive. This was one among many material indications of the university's interest in Asia – generations of students would pursue medical and other careers in the colonies. The Cork city fathers however revealed an orientalist disdain for the statue when in 1907 they discussed not so much where, but rather whether, it should be preserved – in a newspaper controversy they were embarrassed for the philistinism of their response (Cox 2013, pp. 128-30).

An orientalisising approach extended even to the collection (or borrowing) of people, as in the 1925 visit to Ireland of Tibetan 'dancing lamas' brought to Dublin to dance and play music before showings of the new *Epic of Everest* movie documenting the 1924 Mallory/Irvine expedition (Cox 2013, pp 169-71).³ Public interest in Asia at a distance however contrasts with the pervasive religious intolerance within Ireland that meant almost none of the handful of people who identified as Buddhist in the available census returns seems to have done so publicly, with the wonderful exception of Robert Gibson (d. 1914) of Dromcollogher – a spiritualist, co-operative activist, suffragette ally and nationalist. Even though Vivian Butler Burke (see below) organised Wesak (Buddhist New Year's) celebrations in Dublin in 1935, she does not seem to have put her name to them within Ireland.

Collaborative digital humanities research – restoring forgotten Irish religious lives

Most known Irish Buddhists of the period were thus to be found in Asia. Of these, two are already the subject of extensive research for other reasons: Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), famous for his writing on Japanese culture (Cox 2013, pp. 236-41), and the transgender pioneer Michael/Laura Dillon (1915-1962) who, as Lobsang Jivaka,

³ Mathematician Mary Everest (the family name pronounced 'Eve-rest', not 'Ever-est') was niece of Sir George Everest after whom the mountain was named. Her husband, George Boole, Professor of Mathematics at Queen's College Cork (now UCC) created Boolean algebra, basic to the design of computer circuits underpinning the kinds of digital humanities research discussed below.

died a Buddhist novice in Ladakh (Cox 2013, pp. 271-8). Research on other Irish Buddhists of this period consequently had to be done from scratch, usually in collaborative approaches. Much of our understanding of the early Irish Buddhist vanguard thus takes the form of a set of parallel biographies, constituting a prosopography where multiplicity has to substitute for individual depth in some cases.

Along with U Dhammaloka/Laurence Carroll (another alias), research on Charles James William Pfoundes, John Bowles Daly and Vivian Butler Burke illustrates this approach.

The discovery and investigation, in collaboration with Shin'ichi Yoshinaga (Kyoto) of Charles Pfoundes (né Pounds, 1840-1907) revealed an extraordinary pioneering Irish emigrant and mariner whose enduring passion for the culture and religion of Japan, where he lived for nearly thirty years, from 1863 to 1876 and again from 1893 until his death in 1907, led him to launch in London in 1889 the first – and for well over a century entirely forgotten – official Buddhist Mission to the West. Pfoundes' 'Buddhist Propagation Society', based in London where Pfoundes lived between 1878 and 1892, was sponsored by Pure Land (Jodo Shinshu) Buddhists in Kyoto. Among several publications on Pfoundes beyond the account in *Buddhism and Ireland* our most comprehensive is 'The first Buddhist Mission to the West: Charles Pfoundes and the London Buddhist mission of 1889 – 1892' co-authored with Professor Yoshinaga, a scholar with unrivalled knowledge of esoteric and 'alternative' East-West translocal religious connections and interactions in the decades around 1900 (Bocking, Cox & Yoshinaga 2016; Bocking 2013; Bocking 2021).

John Bowles Daly (c.1844–c.1916) was a disillusioned Anglican clergyman, studied by Cox and Mihirini Sirisena. After the disestablishment of the (Anglican) Church of Ireland in 1869 he worked in the poor East End of London, became a Theosophist and accompanied Col. Olcott to Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Here he became involved in the Buddhist Theosophical Society (BTS) schools; lay Buddhist schools with a modernist English-language curriculum set up by Ceylonese Buddhist reformists to counter Christian missionary schools. Daly's 1890 *pansil* (lay conversion) ceremony was conducted by Ceylonese chief monk Hikkaduwe Sumangala. Daly became principal of Mahinda College in Galle, Ceylon, before falling out with the BTS, worked briefly for the colonial authorities as commissioner for Buddhist Temporalities (that is, properties and revenues) and eventually left for India and then Australia (Cox 2013, pp. 229-36; Cox & Sirisena 2016).

Another remarkable figure is Vivian Butler Burke (c.1881–1937). Some research on her life has been carried out by Alicia Turner, Laurence Cox and Margery Reynolds but more remains to be done (Cox 2014). Burke was the daughter of a mixed (Catholic-Protestant) marriage whose parents had emigrated to the US. Following their death, she returned to Ireland around 1920 and became involved in anti-Treaty republicanism.⁴ Butler Burke's life mixed politics, art and spirituality: she

⁴ I.e. opposition to the Treaty by which Ireland became a Free State (but a Dominion within the Commonwealth) while the United Kingdom retained the Protestant-dominated region now called Northern Ireland.

corresponded with Mohandas Gandhi, the German journalist and satirist Kurt Tucholsky and the French dramatist and mystic Romain Rolland, worked with Irish poet Ella Young and was a friend of American actor and director Orson Welles. Around 1927 she responded to a request by reformist Buddhists to set up a centre in Dublin and did so in her own house on Harcourt Terrace, until 1935 or 1937. Here she hosted events including the Wesak celebration and talks by Sri Lankan reformer A.P. de Zoysa, then completing a PhD in London. She was also an Irish contact for the Maha Bodhi Society in Calcutta led by Anagarika Dharmapala.

Dhammaloka and his world

Our research on U Dhammaloka began in 2009 when digital resources that have proved crucial to our research such as full-text online newspaper archives and digitised books and journals from the turn of the twentieth century were only starting to become available – along with the internet bandwidth to accommodate them. Since then the range of resources and their accessibility has of course increased substantially, though English-language sources overwhelmingly predominate. The three authors of *The Irish Buddhist* (Alicia Turner, Laurence Cox, Brian Bocking) with the help, often substantial, of dozens of academic colleagues around the world, communicated mainly by email and occasionally skype and met together in person perhaps five times during ten years of research, at academic events in Canada, Ireland and Japan. The work could not however have been done in times of Covid – our online research was underpinned by three fully-funded research projects enabling archival searches and publications by research assistants (Choompolpaisal 2013, Sirisena 2017), funded conferences, and travel for research and academic presentations in a dozen countries.

Our findings on Dhammaloka are comprehensively presented in *The Irish Buddhist: The Forgotten Monk who Faced Down the British Empire*. The book substantially rewrites the early history of ‘global Buddhism’, a story hitherto told ‘from above’ about genteel scholars interested in Buddhist philosophical ideas. Our research delved into more than a thousand mostly fragmentary records to uncover the down-to-earth words and actions of a radical working-class Irish freethinker who ‘went native’ to become a sincere and fully observant Burmese-style Buddhist monk. Dhammaloka campaigned vocally across Asia for Buddhist values and traditions threatened by colonialism in a way that clearly shook the British establishment. However, *The Irish Buddhist* does not by any means proffer a plebeian inversion of the ‘great man’ theory of history. In contrast, the research reveals that Dhammaloka – like most Irish Buddhists of this period – could not have filled the role he did without the active strategic backing of Asian sponsors and supporters who found Dhammaloka as a ‘white’ monk useful to the anti-colonial cause.

Dhammaloka was not ‘the first Western Buddhist monk’ (a chimera we deal with in the book) but he was certainly the first European to ordain other European Buddhist monks. Publication of the book has generated significant interest and useful feedback from readers and since publication we have discovered more about two of the European Buddhist ordinands most closely associated with Dhammaloka. The first, M.T. de la Courneuve, was ordained personally by Dhammaloka at his Buddhist mission in Singapore, the second, Richard Laffère, by the head priest of

Dhammaloka's home (Tavoy) monastery in Rangoon and we take the opportunity to offer some of these new findings here.

When writing *The Irish Buddhist*, all we knew of Dhammaloka's Singapore ordinand were his initials and surname 'M.T. de la Courneuve'; that he was an Englishman who immediately prior to ordination had been a British colonial policeman in Perak (today's Malaysia); that he was ordained as U Dharmatrata in October 1904 and that, according to the Singapore *Straits Times* which described the ceremony in some detail, he was the son of a Deputy Commissioner (a very high rank) in the Burmese branch of the Indian Civil Service.

Following publication of *The Irish Buddhist*, 'M.T.' was identified as Montague Thomas de la Courneuve who was born in India in 1878, attended school in Bristol, UK, in the 1890s and died of wounds in France during WWI in April 1917.⁵ His father Frederick, a coal mining engineer in Raniganj (now West Bengal) died in 1896 when Montague was eighteen. His uncle, Frederick's brother Stewart Howard Thomas de la Courneuve,⁶ who was indeed a top grade Deputy Commissioner in Burma, soon afterwards married – contrary to marriage laws of the time in both the UK and British India – Montague's widowed mother Lisette (née Stewart). The marriage was legal because it took place in Ceylon which was not part of British India and whose more liberal rules on matrimony allowed a woman to marry her deceased husband's brother. Thus by 1904, the year of Montague's ordination by Dhammaloka, Stewart was Montague's stepfather as well as his uncle.

A decade previously, and more obviously relevant to this chapter on Buddhism, Stewart H. T. de la Courneuve had contracted another marriage – of a kind decidedly unusual for prominent civil servants in Burma – when he wed a Spanish-Portuguese woman who had been left orphaned in infancy by her parents' death during a trade voyage to Rangoon. The girl had been brought up by a local Burmese couple and the adoptive parents agreed to the marriage only if it was conducted according to Buddhist rites. Hence it was that around 1886 Montague's future stepfather publicly underwent a Burmese Buddhist marriage in the British capital Rangoon (followed within a decade by a Buddhist divorce, which freed him to marry his brother's widow Lisette and his ex-wife to marry 'a Shan gentleman').⁷ Montague was not, therefore, the first member of his family to submit to Buddhist law and he would have been familiar with Buddhism in Burma for years before he ordained.

After his ordination by Dhammaloka, Montague remained a monk for a year or more. He eventually emigrated to Canada where he married in 1912. In 1915 he enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, his religion on the attestation form (and subsequently on his Army death record) shown as 'Buddist' (*sic*). Whether there

⁵ We are indebted to Dr. Charles Booth (University of the West of England, Bristol) for the identification of Montague de la Courneuve arising from his research on Bristol colonial returnees in WWI (Fedorowich & Booth, 2021).

⁶ The surname 'Thomas de la Courneuve' reflects the family's French-Welsh antecedents.

⁷ The summary details here derive from numerous genealogical sources including Montague's war record at <https://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.item/?op=pdf&app=CEF&id=B2413-S021>. We are grateful to descendants of the Stewart/Thomas de la Courneuve families for providing valuable items of information.

were other self-declared Buddhists, Irish-ordained European ex-monks or otherwise, in Toronto around 1915 remains so far as we know an open question.

The second of Dhammaloka's close followers about whom more details have emerged only since publication of *The Irish Buddhist* was a Dublin civil engineer called Richard Lawson Laffère who went to Asia for work around 1902 and was ordained as U Vara in February 1905 in Rangoon. The ceremony was conducted by U Vicitta, head of the Tavoy monastery, Dhammaloka's Burmese home. Laffère had worked in the Malay States and Siam (present day Malaysia and Thailand) before his ordination. As U Vara he was reported to be assisting Dhammaloka with various Buddhist propagation projects during 1905 and at some point thereafter returned to lay life. By November 1906, according to the *Madras Weekly Mail*, he was working professionally in Madras (Chennai) and by 1907 was Assistant Engineer in charge of government buildings in the port of Bunder Abbas in the Persian Gulf (Administration Report of the Persian Gulf 1905-1910).⁸ He died there on 22 June 1909, the consular death certificate recording his age as unknown. He was 30.

There is a pattern. As with Montague de la Courneuve, the radical step (for a European) of ordination as a monk was by no means Laffère's first engagement with Buddhism. In Dublin, where he had lived with relatives following the early death of both parents, he subscribed to *Light of Asia*, the magazine of the Jodo Shinshu mission in San Francisco (which incidentally used as part of its rituals adapted for American devotees a Buddhist hymn 'Rejoice' arranged by Dhammaloka to the tune of 'Ye Banks and Braes O' Bonnie Doon').⁹ Laffère was sent two copies of each issue, one probably forwarded by his relatives to wherever he was working in Asia. Next door to his address at 7 Gilford Road – and presumably in some way connected – was one of a tiny number of households with members who returned their religion as 'Buddhist' in the 1911 census. Its five residents (all boarders) comprised Dublin medical students Ralph Mecredy and Francis Crosslee, English journalist Arthur Garbutt (all much younger than Laffère) and widowed mother and daughter Elizabeth and Isobel Warrington, both India-born and living in Dublin since about 1900. Laffère's own younger relative at no.7, Atha Laffère, was herself a rare Irish freethinker.

It seems clear that in heading for Asia Laffère was looking for more than engineering work. Like Montague de la Courneuve he spent a year or so as a monk, but while we have a record of Montague self-identifying as a Buddhist ten years after his disrobing we have, so far, no documentary evidence that would tell us whether Laffère continued to regard himself as a Buddhist up to the time of his death in 1909.

Ireland and Buddhism after Empire

With the independence of what became the Free State (1922), most of Ireland left the British empire. Together with general imperial decline and the increasing confessionalism of both states (the Free State, from 1949 the Republic, and Northern Ireland), this meant that all kinds of exchange with Buddhist Asia declined

⁸ Also Bandar Abbas and other spellings.

⁹ We are grateful to Prof. Thomas A. Tweed (University of Notre Dame) who discovered and shared with us this remarkable musical link between Dhammaloka and Buddhists in San Francisco.

considerably, so that 1950s Ireland knew considerably less about Buddhism than did the 1850s.

Matters began to change with the birth of an Irish counter-culture from the late 1960s on, and Ireland's increasing role as a rural retreat for romantics from other western countries. 1971 and 1972 saw the first public affirmations of Buddhism in Ireland for a century, and as the decade progressed the first Buddhist centres appeared, in rural west Co. Cork and working-class Dublin. A few people travelled directly from Ireland to Asia in search of Buddhist teaching, while members of the vast Irish diaspora elsewhere became interested in Buddhism and some Irish people encountered Buddhism in different forms in the UK, the US and other western societies.

This period was also that of 'The Troubles' and rising sectarian tension in the North, as well as right-wing Catholic activism in the South culminating in the 1983 constitutional ban on abortion. Buddhist pioneers in this period thus still had to overcome strong cultural-religious resistance to their interest. Characteristically, Maura Soshin O'Halloran was Irish-American, involved in political and cultural radicalism, who then travelled to Japan for Zen training, receiving Dharma transmission shortly before her accidental death. Her diaries, published as *Pure Heart, Enlightened Mind*, have become globally known.

For later generations, particularly in the Republic, matters have been less fraught as feminism, LGBTQ+ activism and other forms of cultural change have dismantled much of the apparatus of Catholic power. In the 2016 census there were 9,758 self-identified Buddhists, of whom 53.7% held Irish nationality, a proportion in line with previous figures. Western converts (not only Irish) outnumber immigrant Buddhists, not massively in absolute terms, but very substantially in terms of the organisation of Buddhist centres and temples¹⁰. There are thus two faces to Buddhism in today's Ireland: a public face dominated by western converts and a private/family space in which immigrant communities are more common.

More recent research and publications on Buddhism

Parallels between our research on Buddhism and similarly fruitful and innovative research projects in other areas of the academic study of religions are discussed in the Introduction to this book. Since the publication of *Buddhism and Ireland* in 2013, Buddhist groups and communities in Ireland have evolved but not transformed, with numbers rising but a similar relationship between converts and immigrants to that sketched above. Numbers had grown by the 2016 census, reflecting a recovery from the 2007-8 economic crash. The COVID pandemic that began in 2019 will almost certainly have affected the numbers of Asian Buddhists in Ireland in various ways, but the scheduled 2021 census which might reveal trends was postponed until April 2022. Conversely, the move online forced by the pandemic represents absolutely nothing new for Buddhism in Ireland, which has always been shaped by physical distance both from the homelands of Asian Buddhist traditions and the western European or north American centres of newer Buddhist groups. If anything, Irish-based Buddhists are likely to find that what had previously been their online lifeline,

¹⁰ Not having been an imperial metropolis, immigration to Ireland lacks the large numbers from individual states which in other countries have led to substantial migrant Buddhist organisations.

not always much needed by Buddhists in Asia – or for that matter in the UK or US – is now massively boosted, as larger and better-resourced populations now require the scale of connection that smaller and more peripheral Buddhists have always needed.

Since its inception in 2014, the *Journal of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions (JISASR)* has sought to encourage work by Irish scholars and/or work on Irish topics, as well as attracting contributions in any area of the academic study of religions from scholars worldwide. The first *JISASR* article specifically on Buddhism was Alicia Turner's ISASR keynote on the study of religion in 2014 (Turner 2014). The 2016 issue, a *Festschrift* for Bocking on his retirement, contained several articles covering a wide range of Buddhist-related topics: Kate Crosby and Janaka Ashin on the impact of international Buddhist networks on the Burmese nationalist monk Shin Ukkat̃ha, Cox and Mihirini Sirisena on John Bowles Daly (above), Michael Pye on the steady development of a distinctive female-led 'new religion' (The White Light Association) in culturally Buddhist Japan, Tim Barrett on rival interpretations of Tokugawa Japanese writings on Buddhism and Confucianism, Stefania Travagnin on the life, mission and mummification of the transnational (China, Tibet, Taiwan) Buddhist woman Elder Gongga, and in 2017 Brigitta Kalmar on Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage culture in India.

Beyond these, Dr Tatsuma Padoan, Lecturer in East Asian Religions at UCC and a specialist in Japanese religions, is completing (2022) a British Academy Newton International Research Project entitled 'A Semiotics of Sacred Geography: understanding pilgrimage and holy sites in a comparative perspective' (see Padoan 2021) while John Ó Laoidh (Maynooth) whose PhD research focused on the gendered aspects of pedagogy in transnational Korean (Son) Buddhism has co-authored with Laurence Cox a 2021 article on Japanese Buddhism in Ireland for the *Journal of Religion in Japan* (Cox and Ó Laoidh 2021). A recent book by Antony Goedhals' (Pretoria) on Lafcadio Hearn's 'neo-Buddhist' writings (Goedhals 2020) adds to our understanding of colonial-era Irish-Buddhist links, while Peter Doran (Queens University Belfast) has published a critical exploration of the political economy of mindfulness (Doran 2017) and Eilís Ward (National University of Ireland Galway) a book on Buddhism and neo-liberal therapy culture (Ward 2021). The Irish Network for Studies in Buddhism plays its role in connecting Study of Religions scholars, theologians and Buddhists with occasional seminars and email communications.

Future prospects

Irish universities had a significant involvement with the Orientalist project in the decades between the highly controversial opening up of the Indian Civil Service to competitive examination in 1855 and Irish independence (see Cox 2013, ch.3). In the mid-twentieth century, Asian Studies in the Republic of Ireland would be reduced to Biblical Studies and theological polemic gradually replaced by interfaith dialogue, as the purposes of empire were replaced by those of Christian churches. The opening decades of the twenty-first century have seen a revival of Asian Studies in various contexts, tied to increasing business links especially with China and India as well as Irish universities' attempts to recruit Asian students and develop their own Asian expertise. At the same time the study of race and ethnicity, immigration and

multicultural societies creates openings for the study of religions including different kinds of Buddhism within Ireland. Finally, the increased engagement of Irish Buddhists with the state, reflected in the founding in 2018 of a broad-based 'Irish Buddhist Union' signals a growing tendency of Buddhist institutions to seek access to the various possibilities for 'religions' offered by the architecture of the Irish state (historically with only Catholicism and Protestantism in mind). These include opportunities for fostering more diverse and relevant forms of Religious Education at school level.

If Irish universities become able to offer the sort of systematic and specialised language teaching that has historically been the backbone of Buddhist Studies in Europe, it is only likely to be for East Asian languages, and perhaps without the study of classical Chinese that is key to the East Asian Buddhist textual tradition. Similarly, the approach more common in North America of a focus on local Buddhism with an ethnographic emphasis on religious experience may be limited by the small size of Irish Buddhism overall.

However Ireland's own postcolonial, diasporic and multi-ethnic situation offers a particular vantage point for the study of *globalising* and *translocative* Buddhism from the mid-19th century to the present, and the UCC department from the start recognised this fact and established its strengths in the area of 'contemporary religions' (embracing broadly the 19th century to the present). This approach faces fewer (not no) linguistic constraints and fits with the Irish situation where only a small minority of self-described Buddhists in Ireland are affiliated with a physical centre or temple, so that the large majority of Buddhist practice on the island is mediated by online relationships, international organisations, global intercultural discourses and the circulation of books, artefacts, recorded talks and practices – all of these relevant for physical centres as well. The combination of Ireland's extensive global diaspora (estimated at around twelve times the 6 million population of the island, after nearly two centuries of sustained emigration) and Ireland's own increasingly international and multicultural population can in fact be a significant strength in this respect. This is illustrated by the research history sketched out in this chapter – and throughout this book in respect of other Irish research in the history of religions.

The Covid pandemic will we hope have faded into history somewhat by the time this book is published, but Brexit – to all appearances a regressive process hardly begun at the time of writing and with no predictable outcome in the short, medium or long term – rather remarkably leaves Ireland as the only EU country apart from Malta where English, now dominant as the language of international research, is a native language – a significant element of Irish–English bilingualism notwithstanding. We might therefore expect to see some kinds of EU-funded research shift from British to Irish universities as a part of this; but the contours remain blurred at present.

In terms of open questions for the Irish academic study of Buddhism, by far the most important research lacuna relates to the study of Asian Buddhists in Ireland. Unlike most post-imperial countries, where large numbers of immigrants from a small number of ex-colonies made the founding of religious institutions to serve their own religious needs relatively straightforward, immigration to Ireland is both very diverse and small in absolute numbers, meaning that immigrant-led Buddhist temples or organisations are rare. At present only Soka Gakkai International and a Thai temple

in Mitchelstown seem to be primarily or partially oriented towards immigrant Buddhists, although of course many centres and groups with largely Irish or white convert organisations have Asian teachers at least occasionally present.

This means that most Asian Buddhist practice in Ireland takes place either within public contexts constructed by and for western converts, or in largely private settings. It is furthermore massively diverse, both linguistically and culturally, the census picture revealing many different small groups of Asian Buddhists. The obvious hope is that the coming generation of 'new Irish' postgraduates, equipped with relevant language and cultural skills, will be able to carry out ethnographic research in at least some of these contexts at what is now, in the 2020s, a moment of transition between immigrant populations dominated by first-generation adults and their second-generation children.

An 'Irish Buddhist' is no longer an oxymoron. Instead, today Irish Buddhists may represent two equally interesting phenomena, in roughly equal numbers. One comprises immigrant communities from around Asia. If these groups are unlikely to control their own religious institutions, buildings and teachings in Ireland as they would have done in Asia, some at least have a clear interest in articulating their identity in religious terms. The other comprises westerners, typically brought up within one of Ireland's dominant religious communities, engaging in some of the forms of internationally-mediated religious exploration, including Buddhist forms, that are often said to characterise late modernity. These two categories of 'Asian' and 'Western' are of course increasingly likely to overlap and blend, and in this respect too the academic study of Buddhism offers a privileged vantage point into some key areas of 'religion' – which has always been one of the island's most widely-recognised languages.

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