

Book Review



Buddhism and Ireland: from the Celts to the Counter-Culture and Beyond.

By Laurence Cox. Sheffield, England and Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2013, xi + 413 pages; ISBN 978-190-804-9308, £24.99/\$35 (paperback); ISBN 978-190-804-39292 (cloth), £65/\$99.95.

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Marxist sociologist of social movements Laurence Cox's *Buddhism and Ireland* expands into nearly four-hundred lively pages what to him first appeared to take but a [JGB article](#)¹ in 2009. His astute interpretations and groundbreaking research stretch into a sustained grappling to pin down a phenomenon that presents a case study beyond any insularity. It turns out that one end of Eurasia connects with the other/Other, for far longer and with more traffic than any previous scholars or practitioners seem to have surmised.

Cox contrasts the academic focus on who controlled the means of intellectual production with “grey literature” in Asia (tracts and agitprop produced by late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Irish *bhikkhus* who deployed anti-Christian polemic to rouse natives against missionaries). He elaborates how “experience breaks up the smooth flow of discourse” (p. 39) as authors and activists wander East to West and back again, unpredictably. He highlights his investigation as “a history of people in relationships, rather than a history of ideas; it is a history of empire not so much as ideology but as lived practice, and it is a history of social change as anti-colonial struggle and as counter-cultural transformation” (p. 39–40). He arrays his findings, drawn from testimony and texts, to confront the academic bias for textual domination. However reliant upon the written record for his quest, he prefers whenever possible to interpret decisions as carried out or mooted by those Irish who, having found out about Buddhism, acted on it.

Similarly, Cox asks “whether particular choices and actions mark a step forward in relation to people’s previous situation and in the direction of greater personal clarity, interpersonal solidarity and capacity for transformation” regarding globalizing systems and ideologies, from the two tips of Eurasia (p. 14–15). He distinguishes ancient and medieval glimmers of Buddhist content as consumed by Westerners from more recent contributions. Since the middle of the last century, he locates a shift back to Westerners consuming Buddhism. He cautions against over-reliance on texts for interpretation; trinkets, retreats, or travel may convey far more product labeled “Buddhist” than books. If agency tends to dominate over

¹ <http://www.globalbuddhism.org/10/cox-griffin09.htm>

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dogma or “official” devotees regarding the precedence of Western Buddhists who primarily identify through meditation, this too needs reiteration, for the fluid nature of identification with Buddhism leads many to a revolving door, challenging census data. In the Irish case, where some interviewed still fear “outing,” the pressure of conformity and the impositions or allegiances of a dominant culture must be included, as well as the ability of Buddhist identification and practice to elude facile equivalences. Cox never assumes a devotee of a certain sangha can be summed up by the precepts of that sangha.

Cox cautions that two millennia of Buddhism accumulates vast knowledge and claims, but that these “make it harder for researchers to hear the ‘needs’ which bring people to Buddhism, the problems they are grappling with in their own lives, or the hegemonies they are attempting to dismantle.” Rather, organizations step in to “impose their own interpretation and articulation of these needs.” This occludes what people on the everyday level mean by Buddhism, and “we cannot take accounts formulated within this language at face value—*contra* both the guardians of Buddhist orthodoxy and the left-feminist critique of ‘religion’ *per se*” (p. 33).

Cox explains how Westerners often drift into Buddhism as converts or fellow travelers and insert or fixate on their own naive or filtered predilections. These may often not be what sanctioned ministers desire. Teachers, schooled and approved as the establishment, no matter their often promoted counter-cultural claims, may crack down on earlier experimenters. This imported hierarchy may arrive years or decades later as a witting or unwitting force to push heterodox practice towards uniformity, and this in turn clouds subsequent understanding of how ordinary people as well as those in charge of imposing order or recording dogma reacted to Buddhism. Cox suggests instead examining practice “as a pointer to needs,” as a corrective to too much text. While this proves difficult given the paucity of material for many Irish encounters, the reminder that Buddhism appeals to or repels many based on their own pressing conditions grounds this invigorating approach while it justifies the humanist and Marxist theoretical framework Cox applies.

Readers will find, to take one purported Irish Buddhist encounter, that of (quasi-)Buddhist, pre-Roman influence on Celtic monasticism, that the material basis is thin and the testimony muddled. Cox documents how scraps of “what-ifs” enticed those in the distant and recent past. The gap in transmission is itself a sobering corrective; as many as nine centuries separate the dharma of the East and the farthest island of the West. However, as Cox finds, the core of the “misrecognised biography” (p. 28) within the Barlaam and Josaphat legend does prove the semi-cohesion of that popular, transmitted ur-tale. Yet Cox finds attempts at claiming Buddhist forebears for Christian monasticism (or Celtic nature poetry by implicit concatenation) inconclusive. He gently shelves fervent attempts at “origin relations” alongside Graves’ *The White Goddess* as “poetic myths” (p. 63).

The second chapter collects many examples of how the West consumed Buddhist accounts. Testimony from clerics, soldiers, diplomats, pilgrims, and tale-spinners as expressed by learned texts, romances, and chapbooks dominated. The Irish learned more than scholars have claimed. Networks joined the small farmer or laborer, who might have heard a newspaper account of the East recited by a local priest or merchant, in turn informed reliably or otherwise by Jesuits, Dissenters, traders, or journalists, via communication from

China or India. French-language reports enriched Enlightenment discourse in Ireland which began to attempt to make more than mythical sense out of the East. Yet, constrained by conformity to Irish denominational and ethnic allegiances, “being Buddhist” did not appear for pre-modern Irish a viable or comprehensible personal option.

As mapped by Cox, the “circuits of distribution” for Buddhist material into Ireland overlap. A Protestant, “English,” and imperial system intersects with a Catholic, “Irish,” and diasporic one. By the eighteenth century, a middle-class or plebeian readership itself blended with an orally dispersed set of listeners in cities and towns. Steadily if slowly, the sphere of Buddhist transmission widened. A “more restricted distribution of medieval and classical knowledge” gave way to hedge-schools for Catholics under Penal Law, mass education under Protestant reformers, and then empire-building in which the Irish themselves, once colonized, took part via the military and trading (p. 93).

All the same, active interest in Buddhism had to wait for opportunity. This came when “the rising power of Catholic nationalism created a new kind of crisis for old affiliations” (p. 97). The nineteenth-century agitations for Home Rule, loyalty to, or freedom from the British Crown, eventually forced what exposure alone to texts or hearsay about Buddhism could not invite or suggest. Conversions began when Buddhism “became an attractive ‘Other’ for some Irish people,” and a choice became feasible, “possible and meaningful” (p. 96). Cox estimates that this choice to legally register as a Buddhist did not occur until a decriminalization of “blasphemy” which occurred after the (partial) independence of the Irish nation, and nearly none took advantage of it, at least as far as historical records document.

Part two of Cox’s study offers a theoretically sophisticated analysis of Ireland as a case study for European reception to and propagation of Buddhism. Cox constructs his case with care. He cites often another popularization of Buddhism’s globalization, Lawrence Sutin’s *All is Change* (2006), but he applies J. Jeffrey Franklin’s “cultural counter-invasion” thesis from *The Lion and the Lotus* (2008) to posit Buddhist hermeneutic challenges to Christian mindsets, as he unveils this “minor moral panic” (p. 156).

Avoiding, when possible, sole reliance on textual evidence for earlier centuries, Cox places knowledge of Buddhism within networks that expanded exponentially as Asian anti-imperialism played off concurrent Irish colonial tensions. By the end of the nineteenth century, the choice to convert or sympathize loomed. As formal sanctions declined even while “informal social costs” accrued, a few Irish people contemplated taking refuge in, or encouraging the promotion of, Buddhism. Cox emphasizes the impacts of this decision. Most of those so inclined early on were from the Anglo-Irish establishment, and if they served overseas in Asian locales, their careers would have to shift, languages would have to be mastered, and new networks would have to be found for freethinkers cut off from ecclesiastical or imperial enterprises. Outmarriage usually met with disinheritance, and, within what Cox labels “Dissident Orientalism,” the decision to separate from a matrix where “religion, ethnicity, career and social identity were intimately connected had enormous implications for one’s whole life” (p. 110).

Cox's third chapter pursues Irish participation in the British Empire and missionary efforts. The Irish "used religion to critique empire and their own culture" (p. 109), and, as with other colonies caught up in the running of the royal realms, ambivalence about what was carried out overseas in relation to what was perpetuated back home continued among a few driven to chastise what most did without complaint. Soldiers and missionaries brought into Ireland many stories and images from Buddhist culture, and, among intellectual Catholics at the turn of the last century, these messages met with interest and dread. Cox charts a "minor moral panic" (p. 156) by papal pundits recoiling from Buddhism's nihilistic aura, even as plain Catholics were kept from knowledge of its energies.

Meanwhile, Catholics charged with converting the Asian pagans quailed. Overestimating Buddhists to be forty percent of the world's faithful, they blundered into mission territory severely unprepared. The Columban Fathers entered China not knowing its language. They failed to sway many to the Church, and Cox compiles their incomprehension of the religion they met as their foe. Buddhism tended by the intelligentsia to be handled with care for its prestige and lineage, but consigned by Christian evangelists to the bin of racial stereotypes and character flaws of its adepts. Nevertheless, Irish awareness in a less stigmatized form of Buddhism filtered down, if obliquely, into popular culture. Sir Edwin Arnold's successful poem on the Buddha, *The Light of Asia* (1879), found itself publicized in the Dublin press in bowdlerized or blinkered fashion as a story of a prince's reformation. Cox locates in its coverage no mention of the Buddha. Conversely, most Irish references to Arnold's title were "to racehorses or greyhounds, indirectly attesting to its popularity" (p. 169).

Another encounter with the East, the best-known instance for Western readers, has been analyzed far more widely over the past century and more. Cox gives Theosophy a chapter devoted to three concerns. First, Theosophy beckoned some Anglo-Irish away from the "service class" (in Marxian terms), to pursue esoteric concerns. Next, it forced followers to choose between Blavatsky and Olcott's Eastern variety and the Western occult tradition of what became the Order of the Golden Dawn. The careers of respectively Æ (George Russell) and Yeats epitomize this bifurcation. Finally, as Indian contact deepened Western awareness of key distinctions between Hindu and Buddhist concepts as actually practiced rather than as textual claims, theosophical divisions widened.

Cox situates his subjects, marginalized yet inextricably tied to identity, within their era, 1850–1960: "For most Irish people, politics was spoken of as religion, as it was in India or Ceylon" (p. 195). His fifth chapter features the stories of many less heralded than Yeats or Blavatsky, "those who resisted sectarian closure at its height" (p. 213) as agents of solidarity "against the capitalist world-system in its high imperialist phase" (p. 282) outside Irish or British confines. Cox and his colleagues Brian Bocking and Alicia Turner [continue to investigate](http://dhammalokaproject.wordpress.com)² an enigmatic working-class hobo-turned-*bhikkhu*, born in Booterstown, Dublin to an Irish Catholic family. He covered his perhaps subversive tracks as he wandered across America and took the name, after he wound up in Rangoon to go sober and get religion, of U Dhammaloka. From 1900, when he burst into notoriety as a preacher against Christian missionaries, until he just as suddenly vanished after 1914, his

² <http://dhammalokaproject.wordpress.com>

career makes for a lively case study. Through his Buddhist Tract Society, Dhammaloka promoted an Irish model of cultural nationalism for Burma, defending the popular religion (this time, Buddhism) against the colonial elite (again, Protestant Britain). As Cox's "classic Irish Buddhist" by his defiance of the norm and his sustained reinvention in a different guise and a different realm, Dhammaloka appears to fit Antonio Gramsci's model of an "organic intellectual." For me this formation of such a wry, self-confident figure suggests further application.

Irish Buddhists at home and abroad comprised a memorable faction. Their numbers may have been larger than what can be surmised up to a century later, given that reliance on the "means of intellectual production" limits research to those who have published, as did Dhammaloka and his ilk. Many of those who can be verified emerge, moreover, from the educated elite. Even a shortlist of those who can be verified finds Cox resorting to the modifier "eccentric" more than once. Their common roles found them on the fringes, relegated there for counter-cultural (in the 1890s' sense as well as the more recent usage) claims that featured republicanism, the avant-garde, mandarin poses, spurious if bestselling claims (Lobsang Tuesday Rampa for a while had fled to Ireland to evade British demands for his purportedly Tibetan passport) of transmigration, and, in Michael (born Laura) Dillon's case, the first female-to-male transsexual plastic surgery. A doctor, Dillon shifted from Theosophy as he traveled east. Remaking himself into Lobzang Jivaka, his life commemorates total devotion to breaking barriers first of gender, and then, as Cox narrates movingly, those of class and race as he sought to become a humble Gelugpa novice in Ladakh, before his untimely death in 1962.

Bedeiling identification now as then, the pressure for Irish Buddhists to "pass" as Catholics leaves Cox's study necessarily reticent regarding who can be singled out. Allegiances being fluid, those officially Buddhist likely make up its smallest cohort. Hinduism, paganism and ritual magic appealed to mavericks who could creolize these practices more accessibly, given purported Christian or Celtic affinities as imagined or invented by Irish adepts. Cox avers that the "sub-Theosophical version" of Buddhism edged too close to Victorian beliefs for its adoption by seekers, while its "orthodox Asian versions" remained too risky for public identification until a few Buddhists stepped forward in 1971. Historically, "most survived by their pen and died poor" even among the smattering, usually those who had left an intolerant Ireland, who admitted their devotion to the dharma (p. 281).

Such intolerance ebbed as Catholic hegemony over the southern part of the island crumbled between the 1960s and the 1990s. The patrician Protestant service class retreated or emigrated. Educational opportunities and economic expansion drew working-class Catholics into the (sub-)urbanized, and somewhat secularized middle class. While midcentury Victorians knew more about Buddhism, gleaned from imperial information, than almost any Irish people did between the 1920s and 1950s, the counter-cultural turn beckoned a handful towards a hesitant, perhaps furtive, move towards practice. Wearied by sectarian verities and stagnant piety, Dissident Orientalists among disaffected Catholics revived within Irish culture, as communities formed in remote retreats as well as Dublin and Belfast. Blow-ins from Britain and Western Europe conveyed "import Buddhism" during the 1970s–1980s. Then Irish inquirers, often self-taught solitaries who had tended

to lay low, invited missionaries with their “export” version of Buddhism in the 1990s. By the millennium, “baggage Buddhism” increased as Asian immigrants contributed to Ireland’s globalizing economy.

Cox parallels changing Catholic reactions to Buddhism with the “Brezhnev era.” That is, “following a brief period of openness and self-criticism, an institution turning back to internal certainties and organisational routine, relying on increasingly greying cadres to sustain itself” (p. 316). Syncretism, meditation mixing Christian and Buddhist approaches, and ecumenical dialogue after Vatican II capitulated as Rome turned away from liberation theology and Eastern-inspired practices, and as conservative Irish clerics denounced “cults,” yoga, and the New Age in the 1980s.

Maura O’Halloran, the American-Irish Dublin student-turned-Zen-monastic in Japan, attests in her journals to the power of activism, as socialist, feminist, and anti-capitalist campaigns across the world engaged her while fueling her practice in the late 1970s. Cox aligns such awareness with contexts which, while they kept Irish Buddhists marginalized due to sectarian pressures, allowed networks of alternative politics to flourish, even if their precarious nature meant they often had to start from scratch and may not have lasted long. Still, they managed better than those in the North during the Troubles. Buddhists in the British-occupied province often have emigrated, yet the identification of “peace and tolerance” with Buddhism, conversely, has appealed to a few daring to defy deeply divided lines. This topic begged for far more space, but the reserve of many Irish, from the North or South, persisting among certain of Cox’s interviewees demonstrates the difficulty and diffidence of Irish Buddhists.

In the final chapter, Cox elaborates Jan Nattier’s “baggage, import, and export Buddhism,” distinguishing Irish and American varieties. Migrants comprise so tiny and so recent a cohort that nearly no Asians in Ireland have sufficient numbers to build their own Buddhist institutions. Western European teachers exported Buddhism into Ireland from the late 1980s. Importing Buddhism relied on lay rather than monastic trainers, while “Mind-Body-Spirit” circuits construct “informal Buddhisms in private contexts” (p. 328). Moreover, the domestic or occluded nature of Irish Buddhism by many still in the “closet,” or who mix its precepts with other spiritualities, evades clearer academic scrutiny of its hybrid, creole, and characteristically dissident manifestations. Cox estimates a third of such practitioners lack affiliation, and the global dependence of the Irish on British and international “imported knowledge” and contacts means that groups may gather at a home to listen to tapes or meditate rather than, say, flock to Rigpa’s Dzogchen Beara on Cork’s coast, Samye Dzong or the Zen/Insight group in suburban Dublin, or Black Mountain Zen Centre in Belfast. Cox asserts anecdotally that, among importers, less-educated and more female contingents, depending on commercially distributed product for their Buddhist connections, are increasing. Current varieties of Irish exporters, by contrast, gravitate towards hierarchy, rely on tighter doctrine and ritual, appeal to those making a “spiritual career” out of the quest, and may suit male ambitions.

Most seekers aiming at a career train abroad. Most teachers serving the Irish move there from abroad. Immigrant communities also recruit their leaders overseas. Cox analyzes O’Halloran’s choice to leave 1970s Dublin for Japan as representative. Rejecting home,

family, and a job, the option to travel to an enduring Buddhist enclave in a traditional heartland or at least an already solvent Western settlement carried more weight than trying to build a sangha within Irish society. Very recently, while the strain of pursuing the dharma openly in Ireland may be easing, the daily difficulties of professionally sustaining a Buddhist enterprise have limited opportunities all over the island.

The copy for this book claims that since the 1960s, “Buddhism has exploded to become Ireland’s third-largest religion.” This boom echoes as a whisper. The progression from under a hundred self-identified Buddhists in the Republic’s 1991 census to nearly ten thousand (including the North) in 2011 reveals a dramatic, yet still infinitesimal leap forward, to 0.19 percent of those reporting a recognized denomination. Converts make up less than half, with fewer than forty percent of these Irish nationals. Nearly half of the Buddhist E. U. immigrants hail from Britain, trailed by Germany and France. Cox reckons these total about a third of Irish Buddhists, loosely defined by their own affiliations. Reacting against their nation’s past, more persist in autonomy and/or “reflexivity in all fields of life” (p. 350) as part of their counter-culture. For instance, nobody polled among local Irish adepts appears to want to establish a Buddhist school. In a country where pedagogy may likely fall under Catholic or Protestant supervision or intervention, this suggests a fresh start for its nascent Buddhists.

Over ten thousand Chinese immigrants dominate the numbers of ethnic Buddhists, but no temples or organizations exist; the sangha remains within the home or family. Falun Dafa/Falun Gong, contested as to its Buddhist claim, emerges as the most visible Chinese denomination in Ireland, where many students and a turnover population may weaken a more elevated base for Buddhism in public view. Sōka Gakkai International, typically, blurs or breaks down ethnic and convert distinctions, boosting its modest Irish presence since 1978 by way of a growing Japanese population during the 1990s. A Dublin Thai center opened in 2011. Cox suggests the recession may spur greater cooperation between immigrants and converts, drawn together by dependence and common ground.

Commonalities with Catholic, Christian, or Celtic and pagan outlooks creolize Buddhist adaptation. Samye Dzong in the 1990s tried to link Tibetan doctrine with Celtic lore, and Sanskrit with Irish-language parallels. A few Celtic Buddhists invented a lineage, through the aegis of an English-born, American-Canadian émigré butler of Chögyam Trungpa, back to Tibetan origins, blending ecological and pagan elements into a hybrid vocation. In turn, engaged Buddhists agitate alongside Catholic Workers against U.S. military planes at Shannon, raise funds for Tibet, build cross-community outreach in Belfast, and carry out prison visits. Buddhists, as ever enmeshed in their set and setting, have sidled away from O’Halloran’s affirmation of socialism as the proper response to injustice and inequality. Reflecting “mindfulness” mantras marketed by seminars to corporations, many Buddhists seem readier to turn inward to transform themselves first. “Service-class romanticism,” Cox chides, pays less attention to “changing social relationships” while perpetuating the endemic Irish entanglements thwarting equality, given monolithic “ethnic and religious community structures” (p. 369). Today’s “neoliberal boom,” harnessing all to relentless workplace productivity, finds Irish of all sects or none confronting long privation after pursuit of quick profit, so Buddhism may appeal to restless seekers. Whether this brand of Buddhism becomes a narcotic or a shock to the system remains open, as this far Western

island ponders how to integrate, share, peddle, or disguise lore from the Far East.

New Age adherents propel many contemporary innovations branded Buddhist, stirring meditation and mindfulness mantras into an eclectic mission of “self-development” aligned with holistic medicine and psychotherapy. Cox avers that today’s status of Buddhism as “tolerated and timid challenger” may not last as Irish Catholicism weakens and the Celtic Tiger slinks. He asserts that Buddhists will fare better not to defend religion as placid “spirituality.” Given the mordant Irish experience with organized power controlled by clergy, Buddhists should rally “those who seek an end to suffering in the world” (p. 377). Rather than compromise, they must contend and confront. If change will occur, Buddhists need to stand among those refusing to step aside when churches or states shove back. Rejecting both the “moral monopoly” assumed by clergy and the “consumption as a way of life” which for many Irish as for most in the rest of the world has become the new creed, Cox pushes Buddhists into the front lines, using momentum gained by their association with “downshifting” out of the rat race (p. 378). Like the evanescent presence of many past Irish Buddhists, these activists may flicker and fade from the present or future as well, unless published and recorded for scholars such as Cox to track down and promote.

Small flaws (e. g., a welcome index and bibliography, but inconsistent inclusions and indentations; O’Halloran’s Asian years ended not in 1992 but 1982 with her sudden death [p. 324]) should not discourage any inquirer from opening this book to learn so much. Professor and practitioner Laurence Cox’s survey of Irish Buddhism shines the first light into a dim space nearly every colleague might have dismissed as all but vacant. Instead, this lively book sparks energies within texts, interviews, tracts, and tapes, filled by traces he delineates and connects.