

Book Review

The Irish Buddhist: The Forgotten Monk Who Faced Down the British Empire

By Alicia Turner, Laurence Cox, and Brian Bocking. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 320 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-007308-4 (hardcover), \$39.95.

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In this masterful work of collaborative scholarship, Alicia Turner, Laurence Cox, and Brian Bocking uncover the extraordinary life of U Dhammaloka, a working-class Irish radical who “hoboed” his way across America (and perhaps beyond) before becoming a Buddhist monk in Burma in 1900. Once ordained, Dhammaloka became a “celebrity preacher” (25) best known for his staunch denunciations of the British colonial enterprise and its promulgation of “the Bible, the Bottle and the Gatling Gun” (Christian missionary activity, alcoholism, and an oppressive military presence). With a skill for public relations and campaigning, Dhammaloka set about spreading his message through cross-country speaking tours, newspaper reports, the printing of freethinking literature, and the establishment of free schools in places like Singapore, Penang, and Siam. Despite regular police surveillance, charges of sedition, and his own shameless self-promotion—according to one source, he carried around a notebook full of more than a hundred newspaper clippings “bearing witness to the truth of nearly every assertion he had made” (164)—Dhammaloka’s story was largely lost to posterity after he faked his death and disappeared in 1913. It was nearly a hundred years later that he began to appear as “a person of interest” (8) in the disparate research fields of Turner (Burmese Buddhism), Cox (Buddhism in Ireland), and Bocking (Japanese Buddhism). With these diverse backgrounds and interests, the three authors set off on a ten-year quest to uncover the story of the Irish monk who, as the subtitle puts it, “faced down the British empire.” The result is *The Irish Buddhist*, a unique crossover academic trade publication that unearths a lost world of early 20th century “plebeian cosmopolitanism” (126–129, 247–249) and provides much to ponder for scholars of modern global Buddhism, colonialism, and South and Southeast Asian social history.

The Irish Buddhist takes a largely chronological approach to Dhammaloka’s life, in ten chapters plus an introduction and epitaph. In chapter one (“Dhammaloka before Dhammaloka”), Turner, Cox,



and Bocking dig through an array of archival records and often recently digitized historical materials to recover the first forty to fifty years of Dhammaloka's life. Unlike his post-1900 activities, which are supported by numerous sources, his "pre-1900 past remains obscure" and the authors acknowledge that "we can only make various kinds of identification with different levels of probability . . . What we have are fragments and assertions, suggestions, observations, and asides, all to be taken with a pinch of salt unless proved otherwise" (25-26). Dhammaloka's personal accounts of his pre-Buddhist life (often told and recorded by others), for instance, are anything but straightforward. As a "dedicated self-publicist" (26) who faked his death twice, operated under multiple aliases, and had a taste for embellishment (if not downright lies), nearly everything he said or that was said about him had to be cross-checked and corroborated with other sources. This is history how it should be written: based on the evidence at hand, with acknowledgement of its limitations and clear explanations of why certain interpretations are more plausible.

With a careful eye, the authors surmise that Dhammaloka was most certainly born in the working-class neighborhood of Booterstown in Dublin in the 1850s. Whatever his birth name—William Colvin, Larry O'Rourke, and Laurence Carroll are the top contenders—he shared the fate of one in two Irish people of the time and emigrated, moving first to Liverpool (perhaps) and then New York. He then likely took a job working as a sailor and "hoboing" across the United States, jumping freight trains in Chicago, (possibly) shepherding in Montana, and, according to at least one account, picking fruit "side by side with Chinese coolies" (33) in California. With special attention to those American developments that may have influenced his later activism, especially the crossing of ethno-racial boundaries and a preponderance of freethinking and labor struggles among working-class whites, the authors then outline several possibilities for the remaining decades of Dhammaloka's pre-Buddhist life. These include continued years working as a laborer in the US, travels as a sailor across the Pacific, pearl diving in Ceylon, mining in Australia, or perhaps an even longer pre-monastic life elsewhere in Asia. Considering his later dedication to the temperance movement, they speculate that there is also a good probability that many of these years could have been lost to alcoholism (38).

Whatever the case, by 1900, Dhammaloka's life begins to take a clearer shape and the book's next two chapters detail Dhammaloka's early career in Burma as an anti-colonial activist. The authors place particular stress on the nature of Dhammaloka's multi-ethnic, working-class networks, anti-Christian sermons, and first major act of civil disobedience when, "on the night of the largest and most important pagoda festival of the year, at the largest and most important pilgrimage site in Burma" (73), Dhammaloka ordered an Indian police officer to remove his shoes at the Shwedagon pagoda in Rangoon. In calling out the officer's culturally offensive wearing of shoes inside the pagoda grounds, Dhammaloka took up an issue that resonated with his co-religionists and "made explicit his concern, shared by many Burmese, that British rule itself posed a threat to the future of Buddhism" (74). The "shoe controversy," which gained tremendous press in Burma and beyond, and led authorities to draw up a legal case against him for sedition, would some fifteen years later become a central platform in the nationalist independence movement.

Chapters four and five turn to Dhammaloka's travels in Japan and Southeast Asia. In 1902, having dodged imprisonment and with the shoe controversy behind him, Dhammaloka set sail for

Tokyo where he spent the next six months networking with a range of Japanese Buddhist figures. Although he did not leave empty-handed, cultural and political differences soured any opportunities for genuine alliances to form. His initial stay with Oda Tokuno, a married Buddhist cleric, for instance, was too uncomfortable for the barefoot traveling, Vinaya-minded Irishman. When he moved to stay with Shaka Unsho (uncle of the famous Shingon priest turned Theravadin monastic, Shaku Kozen), strong heads and disparate values drove a wedge between them. Unsho and Dhammaloka held vastly different understandings of monastic hierarchy, and while Dhammaloka “did not take kindly to being treated as an inferior,” Unsho felt that Dhammaloka “did not display the Japanese-style level of deference demanded by an eminent host” (88). This was just the beginning. In front of a crowded audience of the International Young Men’s Buddhist Association (IYMBA), the eminent cleric and IYMBA President, Shimaji Mokurai described Dhammaloka as a “child” (90). As Turner, Cox, and Bocking explain:

Dhammaloka was a choice not in keeping with Japanese ideas of modern Buddhism at the time...[his] espousal of Burmese-style celibacy and renunciation hardly matched up to the IYMBA’s ideal of a “modern” Buddhist. Indeed, Dhammaloka outspokenly criticized Japanese priests for not being celibate and for drinking alcohol (91).

Instead, it appears that for the Japanese organizers, Dhammaloka was little more than the token white Buddhist, “a useful prop in a Japanese Buddhist play” (92) aimed at showcasing Japan’s modernity and emerging world power status. Never one to be defeated, Dhammaloka left Japan proclaiming himself to be “Lord High Abbot” and the actual founder and President of the IYMBA!

During the next few years, Dhammaloka drew on his growing network of multi-ethnic supporters to establish a series of free schools for poor, multi-ethnic students in Siam, Singapore and Penang. These are, in this reviewer’s eyes, some of the most compelling pages of *The Irish Buddhist*, as the authors unpack the social networks and worlds which Dhammaloka traversed and in which he flourished in order to achieve these accomplishments. They persuasively argue that, despite the geographically distant locales of Penang, Singapore, Bangkok and Rangoon, there were important similarities between them. Like Dhammaloka’s home in Dublin and the Tavoy monastery in Rangoon from which his networks often extended, the locales in his networks were all close to the water, with active shipping lines, and marked by working class cultures where “the realities of plebeian life meant also substantial interaction and [ethnic, racial, religious] intermixing” (129). The relationships that formed between these Tavoyan monks, Shan saophas, Punjabi migrants, Burman and Chinese merchants, to name just some, have largely gone unnoticed in dominant historiographies, but “networks like these,” the authors argue, “which underpinned much of the day-to-day toil of the colonial period in Asia, made the modern Buddhist revival possible” (130). While Dhammaloka was undoubtedly reliant upon connections with elite patrons—and was even willing to compromise his own ideals at times, such as in his reliance upon Singapore Chinese patrons whose fortunes came from opium and alcohol (112)—the communities he engaged daily possessed “an exceptionally robust plebeian cosmopolitanism” (129).

Chapter six provides a brief detour from the running chronological narrative, outlining the debates and politics surrounding early twentieth century claims to be the “first western Buddhist monk.” This was a label claimed by several white Buddhists and the authors explain the importance of what this kind of boundary crossing symbolized in an era of hardening racial, religious, and social divisions:

a Westerner’s Buddhist ordination was increasingly significant because it marked the formal incorporation of a European into an *Asian* organization. At this highpoint of colonialism, matters were supposed to be going the other way, with colonial subjects seeking Western-style education and employment and the privilege of membership in clubs, fraternal organizations, scientific societies, and so forth (133).

While much of the chapter’s focus concerns possible “firsts” and the tensions between the middle-class English bhikkhu, Ananda Metteya (Allan Bennet) and Dhammaloka, the most compelling sections further the book’s underlining focus on the underbelly of colonial society. In an important turn that resonates with the work of social historians like Harald Fischer-Tine,¹ the authors unpack the fascinating world of “poor whites” (15) and “beachcomber bhikkhus” (134) who “went native” (15) in Ceylon and Burma.

The focus on poor whites and beachcomber bhikkhus like Dhammaloka continues in chapter seven through an insightful analysis of the best-selling travelogue, *A Vagabond Journey Around the World*, written by the American Harry Franck and published in 1910. Franck, who famously traveled across the globe on \$104 in 1904-5 at the age of twenty-two, interviewed Dhammaloka at length while traveling in India and later benefited from Dhammaloka’s connections while traveling through Chittagong and Rangoon. While *A Vagabond Journey* did much to popularize Dhammaloka’s story, it also offers a fascinating view into the daily lives of the cast-offs of empire, “the poor, mainly European, beggars, tramps, itinerant seamen, confidence tricksters, invalids, and ex-prisoners” (158) who made up the bottom half of white colonial society. Known variously as “beachcombers,” “loafers,” and “vagabonds,” these figures often settled with locals and were a major source of anxiety for colonial authorities who were disturbed by their interactions with “natives” and their disregard for the racial hierarchies that imperial power rested upon. The authors argue that Dhammaloka’s own plebeian cosmopolitanism and willingness to regularly ignore ethnic and religious divisions was at some levels illustrative of these wider social classes.

Chapter eight focuses on Dhammaloka’s activities in 1907-8 and his establishment of the Buddhist Tract Society (BTS). The BTS published a range of literature, from Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason* to Sophia Egoroff’s *Buddhism: The Highest Religion*, but it mainly focused on reprints of western freethinking (atheist) arguments aimed at Christian missionaries. Through a detailed discussion of several of these sources, as well as the day-to-day requirements of running a publishing house, the authors demonstrate how Dhammaloka’s BTS “reflected the intellectual

¹ See, for instance, Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class, and “White Subalternity” in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009).

practices of the sociable working-class culture that had formed his outlook, rather than the literary culture of the official universities and churches” (194).

The final two chapters outline the last known years of Dhammaloka’s life. Chapter nine begins with his controversial tour to Ceylon from August to November 1909, on the invitation of the well-known Buddhist organizer Anagarika Dharmapala. Whereas many of Dhammaloka’s daily affairs are difficult to reconstruct due to a paucity of sources, the Ceylonese tour was described in numerous texts, including Dharmapala’s diary, missionary presses, and local newspapers. These provide an unusually detailed and perceptive analysis of the kinds of contentious settings in which Dhammaloka worked. Here, we see a strong-willed and energetic personality who could rally a crowd but whose polemical speech and rhetoric also alienated many. By the end of the tour, Christian missionaries had arranged counter-lectures to combat him and were demanding that he be removed from the country and Dharmapala was at his wits’ end trying to manage the radical Irishman.

The book’s final chapter discusses Dhammaloka’s (second) trial for sedition in Moulmein (Burma), his court appeal in Rangoon, his subsequent flight to Australia, and his eventual disappearance. The authors argue that Dhammaloka was seen as a special threat by the imperial authorities not only because of the content of his message but because of who he was, a white Irishman whose conversion to Buddhism was a rejection of both the racial privilege that his skin possessed and the “civilizing” mission that the empire was built upon. If other whites, let alone Irishmen, were to be coaxed in by his behavior, the Empire would have a problem. In the concluding pages, the authors make a compelling case for why Dhammaloka matters, pointing to the consistency of his commitments, the importance of studying failed movements (such as his), and the world of plebeian cosmopolitanism that his life reveals.

As a crossover academic/trade publication, *The Irish Buddhist* has a little bit for everyone. It is free of jargon and includes a useful glossary of otherwise unfamiliar terms as well as a working chronology of Dhammaloka’s life. The story itself is, at times, stranger than fiction—and seems ripe for a cinematic adaptation—and I can easily imagine assigning it to undergraduates who will appreciate the authors’ ability to distill complex ideas into lucid prose. Contemporary references are peppered throughout the text and keep the reading lively, such as with the reference to Dharmapala’s diary records about Dhammaloka as being “reminiscent of backstage accounts of modern rock tours” (200).

Yet this is not just a book for general readers and undergraduates. Specialists in modern Buddhism will find much to revel in, from the book’s impressive detective work in the archives, to its penetrating insights into colonial society, and innovative use of multi-lingual sources. It sets a high bar and model for collaborative scholarship, the kind of which is rarely employed in Buddhist studies and which, in my view, is sorely needed.² The authors’ sympathies for Dhammaloka are apparent. Without them, one doubts whether such an impassioned and powerful book could have been produced. Yet there are times, admittedly rare, when the admiration for Dhammaloka’s egalitarian,

² Scholars interested in learning more about the long-term collaborative process that went into the making of *The Irish Buddhist* and the Dhammaloka project more broadly, should visit <https://dhammalokaproject.wordpress.com>.

working-class culture seems to cloud the analysis. For instance, the characterization of him as a strict, Vinaya-minded monk who embodied Burmese monastic values (69, 142) is not easily reconciled with the fact that he often “bent the rules” (145, 202), such as when he donned a black robe upon his return from Japan and claimed to outrank his peers through the self-proclaimed title of “High Lord Abbot” (40, 63, 88, 145). Similarly, one of Dhammaloka’s more privileged contemporaries, Douglas Gordon, aka Bhikkhu Asoka, is called out by the authors for his “shocking behavior” (138) when he traveled during the rainy season, thereby disregarding the Vinaya (138). However, the chronology supplied in the book suggests that Dhammaloka likely did the same during the rainy season retreat in 1902, barely two years after his ordination (87, 256). Yet he receives no such rebuke. Critical readers may also be left wondering how Dhammaloka’s radical political activism fits into the modern world of “political bhikkhus,” as sketched by anthropologists like Stanley Tambiah, H.R. Seneviratne, and Ananda Abeysekara. We are perhaps beyond the days of thinking that Buddhism is ever not tied to the political, but a further discussion of this critical moment in 20th century Asian Buddhist history would have been welcomed. These are minor quibbles, however, and those who adhere to the anthropological imperative for “studying up” or “punching up” may very well argue that these are necessary discrepancies when writing about the lives of the poor and the marginalized.³

Theoretically, the work fits with a growing number of studies that take a multi-sited, translocative approach to modern Buddhism, such as Steven Kemper’s *Rescued from the Nation*, Richard Jaffe’s *Seeking Śākyamuni*, and Jack Meng-tat Chia’s *Monks in Motion*.⁴ These works, and others like them, have done much to illuminate the interconnected worlds of modern Buddhism, from globalizing trends in ritual practice and intellectual thought to the distinctive trajectories formed through migration patterns, the pressures of colonial and postcolonial states, and organic social movements. So much of what has been written about these trends, however, has been focused on elite cosmopolitan (and often globetrotting) reformers like Anagarika Dharmapala, Ledi Sayadaw, Henry Olcott, D.T. Suzuki, and others.⁵ Scholarship on the European engagement with Buddhism has also been largely focused on the colonial imaginations and Orientalisms of elite administrator/scholars like Max Muller and T.W. Rhys Davids. Dhammaloka’s story complicates this picture because his identity, dreams, and struggles were formed on the margins of great empires. That is, his “whiteness” and “western-ness” were always differently experienced, for, like the

³ The expressions “studying up” or more recently “punching up” refer to the academic call to place one’s critical lens towards those with power, as opposed to the historically dominant model in anthropology which studied the poor and disempowered. For the classic assessment, see Laura Nader, “Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up,” *Reinventing Anthropology*, ed. Dell H. Hymes (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 284 – 311.

⁴ Steven Kemper, *Rescued from the Nation: Anagarika Dharmapala and the United Buddhist World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Richard Jaffe, *Seeking Śākyamuni: South Asia in the Formation of Modern Japanese Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Jack Meng-Tat Chia, *Monks in Motion: Buddhism and Modernity Across the South China Sea* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁵ See, Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). On D.T. Suzuki, see the 4-volume series, *Selected Works of D.T. Suzuki*, edited by Richard M. Jaffe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014 – 2020).

colonized peoples that he lived among in Asia, he too came from a nation (and class) under colonial oppression.

Where *The Irish Buddhist* truly breaks new ground and establishes clear pathways forward is in its vision of plebeian cosmopolitanism. What we discover through the life of Dhammaloka, in other words, is that the world in which elite Buddhist figures thrived only existed because of the working-class people who kept the supply and communication lines running. Nor do those workers' lives appear any less cosmopolitan. In Dhammaloka's network, we see the bridging of anti-colonial Buddhist thought with contemporary freethinkers in Europe and the Americas. These narratives have rarely been at the center of colonial histories, let alone studies of modern Buddhism. In reading the life of Dhammaloka, we are opened to an entirely new social terrain, one in which hardened ethnic, religious and national identities seem less inviolable and in which new possibilities for imagining, belonging, and identity arise. The authors write that Dhammaloka's life "demonstrates the lie behind stories that empires told to construct and maintain their power—the idea of a radical gulf between colonizer and colonized, the myth of racial difference, or the belief in solidarity based on race or religion" (247). That lesson may very well still have much to offer to all of us living now.