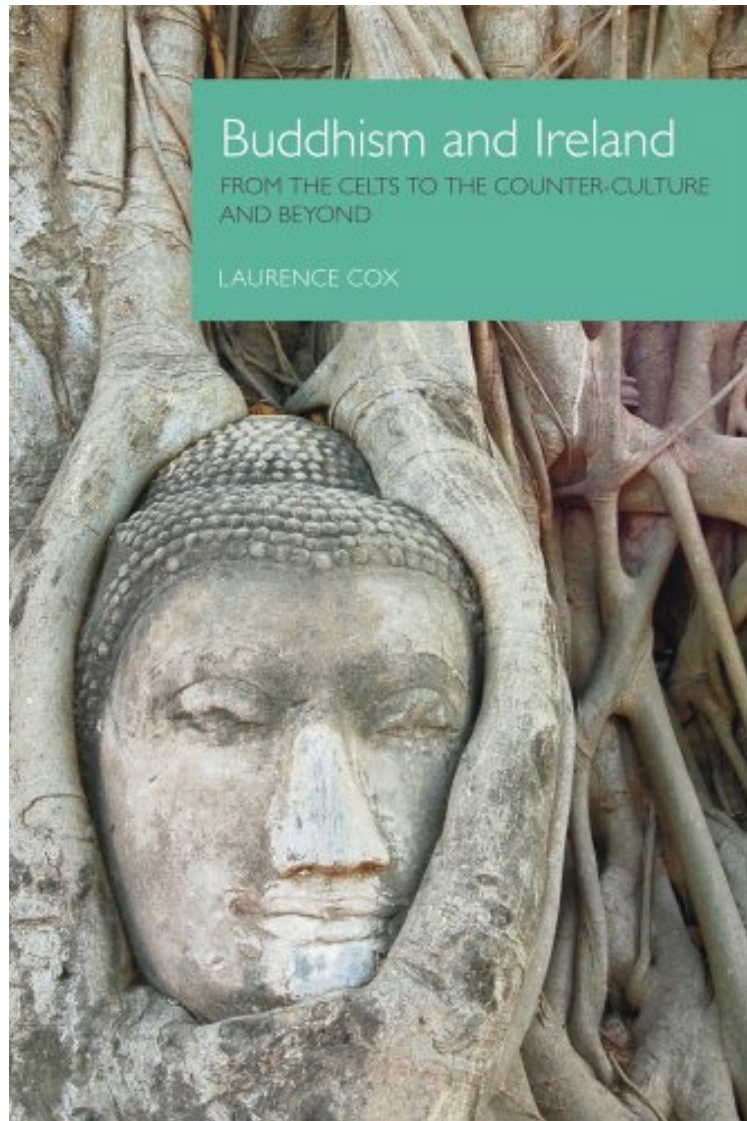


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Buddhism and Ireland: From the Celts to the Counter-culture and Beyond

Laurence Cox

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Laurence Cox : Buddhism and Ireland: From the Celts to the Counter-culture and Beyond before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Buddhism and Ireland: From the Celts to the Counter-culture and Beyond:

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stretch into a sustained grappling to pin down a phenomenon that presents a case study beyond any insularity. One end of Eurasia connects with the other/ Other, for far longer and with more traffic than arguably any previous scholars or practitioners have surmised. Professor Cox contrasts the academic focus on who controlled the means of intellectual production with grey literature in Asia (tracts and agitprop as produced by late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Irish bhikkus who deployed anti-Christian polemic to rouse natives against missionaries). He elaborates how experience breaks up the smooth flow of discourse 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. (pp. 39-40) 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. He distinguishes ancient and medieval glimmers of Buddhist content as consumed by Westerners from more recent contributors (as Orientalists, as missionaries, but also a few introduced here as converts turned propagandists). Since the middle of the last century, he locates a shift back to Westerners consuming Buddhism. He cautions against overly reliant textual emphases for interpretation; trinkets, retreats, or travel may as they do nowadays convey for many far more product labeled Buddhist rather than books. 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 or repels many based on their own pressing conditions grounds this invigorating approach while it justifies the humanist and Marxist theoretical framework Cox applies. The "circuits of distribution" for Buddhist material into Ireland as mapped by Cox overlap. A Protestant, "English," and imperial system intersects with the Catholic, "Irish" and diasporic one. A "more restricted distribution of medieval and classical knowledge before that" period 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) Conversions began only when Buddhism "became an attractive 'Other' for some Irish people," and a choice became feasible, "possible and meaningful." (p. 96) Part two of this study offers a theoretically sophisticated analysis of Ireland as a case study for European reception to, and propagation by a few of, Buddhism. Avoiding when possible any sole reliance on textual evidence for earlier centuries, Cox places knowledge of Buddhism within wider networks. These expand exponentially as Asian anti-imperialism plays off of concurrent Irish colonial tensions. By the end of the nineteenth century, the choice to convert or sympathize loomed. His third chapter pursues Irish participation in the British Empire and missionary efforts. The Irish "used religion to critique empire and their own culture," 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. Another encounter with the East, the best-known instance for Western readers, has been analyzed far more widely over the past century and more. Theosophy earns a chapter devoted to three concerns. 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" as "solidarity activists" and agents outside Irish or British confines. Cox and his colleagues Brian Bocking and Alicia Turner continue to investigate an enigmatic working-class hobo-turned-bhikkhu, born in Booterstown, Dublin to an Irish Catholic family. Known as U Dhammaloka, in 1900 he burst into notoriety as a preacher against Christian missionaries, his career, until it just as suddenly vanishes after 1914, enlivens a memorable case study. A few maverick Irish Buddhists at home and abroad comprise 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 had Dhammaloka and his ilk. Many of those who can be verified emerge, moreover, from the educated elite. One of these, Michael (Laura) Dillon, underwent the first female to male sex change. 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. Bedeviling 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. 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, as Catholic hegemony over the southern part of the island crumbled between the 1960s and the 1990s, ebbed. Blow-ins from Britain and Western Europe conveyed "imported 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. 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. Over ten thousand Chinese immigrants dominate the numbers of ethnic Buddhists. 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. 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 their momentum gained by an association with "downshifting" out of the rat race. Professor and practitioner Laurence Cox's survey of Irish Buddhism shines as the first light projected into a dim space nearly every colleague might have dismissed as all but vacant. Instead, this lively book sparks energies within texts, interviews, tracts, tapes, filled by traces he delineates and connects.

Ireland and Buddhism have a long history. Shaped by colonialism, contested borders, religious wars, empire and massive diasporas, Irish people have encountered Asian Buddhism in many ways over 14 centuries. From the thrill of travellers' tales in far-off lands to a religious alternative to Christianity, from the potential of anti-colonial solidarity to fears of "going native," and from recent immigration to the secular spread of Buddhist meditation, Buddhism has meant many different things to people in Ireland. Knowledge of Buddhist Asia reached Ireland by the 7th century, with the first personal contact in the 14th - a tale remembered for 500 years. The first Irish Buddhists appeared in the political and cultural crisis of the 19th century, in Dublin and the rural West, but also in Burma and Japan. Over the next hundred years, Buddhism competed with esoteric movements to become the alternative to mainstream religion. Since the 1960s, Buddhism has exploded to become Ireland's third-largest religion. Buddhism and Ireland is the first history of its subject, a rich and exciting story of extraordinary individuals and the journey of ideas across Europe and Asia.

"This is a truly fascinating book on how Buddhism arrived and was localised in Ireland. It shows how Ireland was never isolated from a global circuit of knowledge on Buddhism and Asia mediated by empire building, nationalism, colonialism, religion and ethnicity." Cristina Rocha, University of Western Sydney "With a cast of Buddhist characters you couldn't invent, this insightful and clearly written account of the extraordinary relationship between Buddhism and Ireland deftly challenges conventional histories of Western Buddhism." Brian Bocking, University College Cork "Laurence Cox reveals why the practice of Buddhism may flourish in Ireland - and why Irish Buddhists have a longer history than we might suppose. Focus and perspicuity inform this admirable work on conversion and seeking." Joseph Lennon, Villanova University, USA About the Author Laurence Cox is Director of the MA in Community Education, Equality and Social Activism at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. He is co-editor of Ireland's New Religious Movements, Understanding European Movements and Marxism and Social Movements, and a practising Buddhist.