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*Buddhism and Ireland: From the Celts to the
Counterculture and Beyond*

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A Review of *Buddhism and Ireland: From the Celts to the Counterculture and Beyond*

Alison Melnick¹

Buddhism and Ireland: From the Celts to the Counterculture and Beyond. By Laurence Cox. Equinox, 2013, 426 pages, ISBN 9781908049308 (paperback), £24.99/\$35.00.

In recent years, scholars of Buddhist studies have turned their gaze to Buddhism's complicated entrance into the western religious milieu; in that vein, Laurence Cox's *Buddhism and Ireland: From the Celts to the Counterculture and Beyond* is the first extended study of Buddhism and Ireland. In his introduction, Cox makes clear the many facets of the dyad that will be considered in the book: early notions of Buddhism in Ireland, the more recent wave of conversions to the tradition, as well as the lives of Irish men and women living in Buddhist societies across Asia. Cox's previous works have focused on social movement studies, and the development of New Religious Movements in Ireland and Europe. Cox's approach, therefore, will be new to many scholars of Buddhist Studies in North America.

The book takes as its starting point the argument that Irish society's relationship with Buddhism (and Asia) is both longer and more complex than previously assumed. The story begins in the sixth century, and

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chronologically outlines this relationship up to the present day. In addition to drawing from social movement studies and sociology, Cox uses humanist Marxist theory to analyze the relationship between Ireland and Buddhism across an extremely long time period. Within a global historical context, the book considers the social implications of exchange and engagement between proponents of and ideas about Buddhism on the one hand, and Irish at home and abroad, on the other. Of particular interest are the ways in which the behavior of Irish nationals toward Buddhism reflected internal change in Irish social, economic, and political spheres. Thus, an individual's relationships with Buddhism often had much to do with her position in Irish Christian colonial and post-colonial society. Cox gives many interesting examples of different Irish individuals and their relationships vis-à-vis Buddhism, and Irish social constructs loom large as the influences that informed these relationships.

Buddhism and Ireland is divided into three parts, which move chronologically from 500 C.E. to the present day. Chapter Two, "Bog Buddhas and Travellers' Tales: How Knowledge Crossed Eurasia," is synonymous with part one (called "Thinking 'Buddhism and Ireland' in World-systems Context (500-1850)," and addresses the reception history of Buddhism in Ireland from the sixth to the mid-nineteenth century. The chapter uses a world systems approach to show the various ways that information traveled back and forth between Ireland and Asia, and notes various European interpretations of Buddhism, including those of the church fathers, eighteenth century traveler's tales, and everything in between. Flow of knowledge was strongly influenced by local cultural milieu, which meant that ideas about Buddhism were received and interpreted differently in different socio-economic and political circles across Europe. The knowledge that flowed through European communities did not adhere to national boundaries, but rather moved across these, in several languages, through religious circuits, and as a form of entertainment for the literate. Chapter two describes a multi-lingual Ireland in close contact with the rest of Western Europe, and, along with the Introduction, complicates the nationally bounded frame of the con-

cept of “Ireland.” The focus here moves to a pan-European interpretation of Buddhism that was divided along religious lines and socio-cultural classes. A truly complex relationship between Western Europe and the traditions of Buddhism is expressed here.

Part two addresses the relationship between Ireland and Buddhism from 1850 to 1960, including Irish responses to Theosophy and Buddhism in changing religious and economic environments. Of particular interest is the focus on how interpretations of Buddhism shifted among Irish in the colonial and post-colonial contexts. Chapter three, “The Two Empires: Ireland in Asia, Asia in Ireland,” traces the complex relationship between Irish representatives of the British Empire and South Asian religious traditions in colonial India. Brief sketches of Irish soldiers, missionaries, and civil servants, and their interactions with South Asian interlocutors, expresses the rich diversity of late nineteenth and early twentieth century views of Buddhism and its relationship to Christian legitimacy (156).

Chapters four and five discuss conversion to Buddhism within Ireland, and non-conversion engagement with Buddhism, from the Victorian period until the 1960s. In chapter four, “Esotericism Against Empire: Irish Theosophy,” Cox describes how the development of Theosophy in Ireland aided interest in Buddhism (176-77). He gives brief descriptions of individual Irish Theosophists’ relationships with Buddhism, and explains why Irish Theosophists did not generally engage with Buddhism to the same degree as those in Britain and America (188). Chapter five, “The First Irish Buddhists: Jumping Ship and ‘Going Native’,” contextualizes Irish relationships to Buddhism in terms of the economic and social changes of the nineteenth century, the changing role of the British Empire vis-à-vis both Ireland and South Asia, and the move towards partial Irish independence (204). Of particular interest are the religious terms adopted for dissent for the formation of new British and Irish ethnic and political identities. This chapter mentions those who settled in Asia and were involved in movements either loosely or directly associat-

ed with Buddhist modernism, and early Irish adopters (205). Cox explains that, for the most part, early Irish adopters of Buddhism were marginalized from their home communities (205). In conversation with Tweed's scholarship on conversion, this chapter considers the differences in how Catholics and Protestants adopted and interpreted Buddhism (207-210), and examines the difficulties inherent in tracking those who did not identify publicly as Buddhists but perhaps had Buddhist leanings, or adopted Buddhist practices.

Part three, "Buddhism *within* Ireland: from Counterculture to Respectability (1960-2013)," follows Buddhist developments in Ireland in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This section focuses in particular on the 1960s and 1970s and the relationship between Irish counterculture and new interpretations of Buddhism, which were distinct from the countercultural relations, both within and outside Ireland, that occurred from 1850-1960.

Chapter six, "The Founders: Social Movements, Counter-Culture and the Crumbling of Catholic Hegemony," discusses Buddhism's transition in the Irish imagination from marginal "other" to mainstream and acceptable tradition. Cox explains this in terms of class transitions that occurred in Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century to show how Buddhism became an acceptable escape from "the cage of ethno-religious, family, and caste expectations" in Ireland (299). This period saw a development of seeker milieux (302) and, in the 1970s, more frequent public declarations of Buddhist self-identification, as well as the earliest institutionalization of Buddhism in Ireland (308-9). While chapter six introduces the emergence of public, institutionalized Buddhism in Ireland, chapter seven, "Cultivating Buddhism in Ireland: Choices for the Future," describes the development of these institutions. This chapter traces the adoption and creolization of Buddhism in various communities in Ireland. Here Cox examines tensions between Buddhist groups and the role of sectarian identity among Buddhists in Ireland, as well as the development of hybrid religious identities.

Buddhism and Ireland discusses fourteen centuries of interaction, arguably a tall order for any one book. However, the endeavor is supported by brief snapshots, which exemplify specific themes. For example, chapter two touches on the variety of early European interpretations of Buddhism, and includes short descriptions of missionary reports, Greek interpretations of Buddhism, and draws connections between European and Buddhist mythology. The result is a detailed interpretation of a long history of exchange in the form of brief vignettes, which left this reader wanting to learn more about each piece of history that was introduced. Beyond this episodic style, the overall framework for this book is different from most in the field of North American Buddhist Studies; Irish society's relationship with Buddhism is considered within the contexts of global historical and social movement studies, and Buddhism is therefore treated primarily as a social movement. For example, in later chapters, contemporary Buddhism in Ireland is placed in the context of other cultural movements, such as sectarianism, feminism, and social issues, including contraception, divorce, LGBTQ rights, and abortion (322).

While it is interesting to consider Buddhism as a newly adopted religious movement, this can have a decontextualizing effect, and serves to potentially disembody the tradition from its Asian roots, as well as from questions of doctrine and praxis. As Cox mentions in the introduction, there is a disparity in the amount of information we have about what practices Irish Buddhists were participating in, and what beliefs they held, depending on the period in question (2). Further research would be warranted regarding the specific trappings of Buddhist culture and ideology, and the changes that occurred as they made their way to Ireland.

One benefit of the social movement approach found in the book is that the work develops a sense of how ideas about Buddhism shifted across space and time and in relation to different cultural contexts and religious, political, and economic pressures. In this way, the book sheds

light on the varieties of Buddhism extant in the world today, and offers the novice reader one set of examples for how and why the religion has spread. The work also opens the door for future studies of the Irish adoption and adaptation of Buddhist doctrines, praxes, and cosmologies. Perhaps most interesting is that the book traces the transition of Buddhism from threatening “other,” to exoticized “other,” and ultimately, to adopted tradition.

In particular, the last chapters of the book will be of interest to scholars of Buddhism in the modern day. Chapter seven depicts a unique social and religious situation in describing the ways in which Irish Buddhists were isolated locally even as they were closely connected with other communities globally (329). This chapter also describes how Buddhist centers were set up throughout Ireland, and the relationship between these and other new European centers of Buddhist traditions. Buddhism as an adopted religious tradition is still extremely new in Ireland, making it a particularly interesting case study for understanding how ancient religions are adopted and changed in new contexts, and can provide “an adequate language to express what had previously been unsayable” (327).

By considering Buddhism as a social movement, and approaching it through the eyes of an adopting community, this book offers a unique perspective of the religion and its position in western society. Cox furthers conversation of Buddhism in the West and incorporates discussions of colonial and post-colonial studies, Buddhism as a social movement, and early Western critiques and interpretations of Buddhist traditions. This book will be of interest to scholars of Irish history, modern Buddhism, and those interested in the intersection of social movements and religious traditions in the modern day.