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

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# A Review of *The Irish Buddhist: The Forgotten Monk Who Faced Down the British Empire*

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*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, 336 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-007308-4 (hardback), \$39.95.

The publication of *The Irish Buddhist* in 2020 resulted from a rather unique obsession shared by three scholars in disparate fields about a little-known early-twentieth-century Buddhist monk named Dhammaloka. Alicia Turner is on the faculty at York University, Toronto, specializing in religion and colonialism in Southeast Asia; Laurence Cox is a sociologist on the faculty at the National University of Ireland in Maynooth, primarily interested in European Buddhism; and Brian Bocking, who has served on the faculty at the University of London and University College Cork, Ireland, originally trained in the study of East Asian religions. Together they embarked on a collaborative journey requiring ten years of archival research, partnering with a number of colleagues around the world in their quest to collect all the available sources associated with their subject. What they have now provided for the field of modern Buddhist history is not only the recognition of a long-ignored figure of the earliest experi-

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ments in Western Buddhism, but one who functioned as a Buddhist renunciate in a manner unlike any other of his time. *The Irish Buddhist* is the biography of an early-twentieth-century European Buddhist monk, as well as a critical examination of European colonialism and the contending forces that would shape a post-colonial Asia. While the result of this collaboration has provided a significant contribution to current scholarship in both modern Buddhist and postcolonial studies, at times the authors, who together have dedicated a significant amount of time resurrecting the life of Dhammaloka, may have allowed their devotion to the man overstate his stature and influence.

The introductory chapter of *The Irish Buddhist* begins near the end of Dhammaloka's biography, in 1911, when he was brought before the Burmese court and charged for a second time with seditious libel. His outspoken polemical attacks, over a period of about ten years, seem to have been directed primarily against Christian missionaries, whom he found to most embody the pernicious designs of colonial England. He may have been in his thirties at the time, or maybe in his fifties, no one can be certain. His given name may have been one of several that had been associated with his identity, and within two years of this trial his biography reaches a dead end, even as the authors of *The Irish Buddhist* exhausted their search to somehow fill in the gaps of his story. But this text is not as much a narrative of Dhammaloka's life as it is a critical study of what he represents to its authors—a man of the West who long ago recognized the evils of European colonialism.

The authors begin their investigation of Dhammaloka by evaluating the available biographical sources that trace the long and complex period before his full ordination. Almost all these documents, however, originate from the time *after* his ordination and are primarily limited to his own, often contradictory claims. Most problematic are the various aliases he most likely used throughout his life, so that tracking his movements by referencing a legitimate family name became an almost impossible task. The authors settled on the name "Laurence Carroll" because this parti-

cular moniker was cited in a 1913 *American Theosophist* article about Dhammaloka and was the only name out of the six aliases associated with him that could be found in pre-1900 records. One of the few documents from this period was a birth certificate placing a Laurence Carroll in Dublin, born in the year 1856.

In chapter one, “Dhammaloka before Dhammaloka,” the authors attempt to piece together a pre-1900 account of Carroll’s life, based on a collection of scattered, often unreliable documents from this period. They construct a rather rare biographical arc of a late-nineteenth-century Irish working-class man who acquires an enlarged cosmopolitan worldview through a series of hobo adventures first in Liverpool, then the United States, and finally in Australia and Asia. According to the authors, Carroll would have witnessed Catholic-Protestant conflicts in Liverpool, would have participated in labor organizing and studied radical publications as an itinerant worker in the US, would have worked closely with Chinese laborers while hauling fruit in California, witnessing their Buddhist and Daoist temple communities, and would have competed for work with Native Americans and post-Civil War Black laborers. As a working-class migrant worker in Burma, excluded from the society of colonial elites, Carroll, according to the authors, would have experienced closer personal relationships with native workers, and after years of participation in US labor movements possibly engendered a deep affinity for their oppression. Reflecting on this period before Carroll’s ordination, the authors conclude that, “Everything we know of Dhammaloka’s later time as a monk suggests a broad vision of shared humanity, coupled with an (Irish-flavored) hostility to imperial structures of racial power and cultural oppression,” as well as “a complete disenchantment with ethno-religious identification” (47). Yet, given the negligible availability of sources for Carroll’s preordination life and intellectual development, it is difficult, if not impossible, to assert an explicit correspondence between these two periods of his life.

Chapter two, “The Irish Buddhist Wins Buddhist Hearts,” traces the events of only three years in the life of Dhammaloka, 1900 to 1902, but

the available sources from this period are plentiful and largely reliable, allowing for significant biographical detail in comparison to the years prior. While it is not clear exactly when Carroll originally entered Rangoon's Tavoy monastery as a novice, he received full ordination on July 8, 1900, as reported in the local press, with over 100 monks in attendance, and even more lay witnesses. Soon after, he seems to have become something of a celebrity monk, due partly to the novelty of a European adopting a revered Burmese way of life, but also because of his subsequent preaching tours, where rather than providing Dhamma talks he openly attacked the foreign influence of Christian missionaries and asserted the superiority of Buddhism, a religion he claimed to be supported by modern science. These speeches, according to reported accounts, often attracted thousands of attendees, and Dhammaloka, "venerated to the point of adulation" (70), quickly became the white face of a Burmese Buddhist revival movement.

One particular cause attributed to the Irish Buddhist, Dhammaloka, concerned the common practice of foreigners (primarily British colonizers) treading on the grounds of Buddhist pagodas without removing their shoes. In March 1901, Dhammaloka openly admonished an Indian police officer wearing shoes at the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon. This event caused enough of a disturbance to be covered in the local Burmese and English-language newspapers, leading to meetings between British officials and Pagoda trustees. Although not resulting in a major nationalist movement at the time, the authors end the third chapter, "Trampling on Our Religion," by informing their readers that a Burmese nationalist movement did ultimately arise between 1916 and 1919, gaining momentum around this very issue of the colonizers wearing shoes on sacred grounds. While occurring some years after the biography of Dhammaloka comes to a close, they conclude, "Dhammaloka's contributions have not been remembered in Burmese nationalist histories, but he set the stage of what was to become a central political conflict" (83). However, to assume that his actions at the Shwedagon Pagoda in 1901 "set the stage" for the Burmese Nationalist movement fifteen years later is difficult to support,

given that there is no available evidence to show that the movement itself ever regarded Dhammaloka as a model of inspiration.

The following chapter, “Tokyo—An Irish Burmese Monk in Imperial Japan,” traces Dhammaloka’s activities over a six-month period after deciding, rather abruptly and unexpectedly, to travel to Japan. Rumor had it that the uncolonized nation was planning an Asian parliament of religions on the tenth anniversary of the parliament that took place at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. Dhammaloka’s decision may have come from a personal interest in developing a more global, pan-Buddhist reputation, beyond the limitations of his monastic role in Burma. While the parliament never materialized and may have never really had a chance of coming together, one could conclude that this seemingly impulsive decision soon after led Dhammaloka towards a vision of purpose resulting in the most significant activities of his career.

After unknowingly arriving in Japan for what turned out to be a nonevent, Dhammaloka was invited to other less prestigious venues, which nevertheless seems to have had a profound influence on his subsequent interests. In each gathering he seems to have played a rather forgettable role, included primarily as a token “international” attendee. He was asked to speak at an International Young Men’s Buddhist Association (IYMBA) and an East Asian Buddhist Association event, but newspapers did not provide any record of what he said. A student conference held at Takanawa University was one venue that did include speakers from outside of Japan, but Dhammaloka was not added to the agenda; possibly, the authors surmise, his anti-Christian rhetoric led the organizers to fear that he was somewhat of a “loose cannon” (93). He, however, must have understood his role to have been more significant than his hosts did, upon his departure falsely claiming himself to be the founder and president of the IYMBA!

Regardless of the significance of his contributions in Japan, chapter five, “Multiplying Buddhist Missions,” chronicling the years of 1903–

1905, portrays Dhammaloka taking his participation in a pan-Buddhist brotherhood to heart, traveling throughout Southeast Asia and establishing new schools, Buddhist missions, and other communal institutions in Bangkok, Singapore, Chittagong, and Penang. He also began to ordain other European monks in hopes of furthering his missionary influence throughout the region. Given the extent of these travels immediately following the months he spent in Japan, the authors conclude, “Dhammaloka’s globalizing efforts rapidly surpassed the IYMBA organizers he left behind in Tokyo” (98). This may be true, but at the time, any expansion of a Buddhist collective would have surpassed the newly founded IYMBA’s limited interest in such activities.

However, this newfound interest seems to have inspired the most fruitful period of Dhammaloka’s relatively brief career. Not only was he successful in garnering the political support necessary for his endeavors, but he was also able to target broader ethnic populations, from disadvantaged socioeconomic strata, to reap the benefits. These activities moved beyond his rhetorical support for native populations, providing tangible assistance to improve opportunities in their lives. In reflecting on this period of Dhammaloka’s life the authors conclude that his working-class cosmopolitanism was instilled throughout his early contact with ethnic and religious conflict, leading to a shared pan-Asian vision of mutual cooperation, a vision that eventually succumbed to more pervasive geo-political forces.

Uncovering Dhammaloka’s activities offers us a remarkable window into these cosmopolitan connections—among Tavoyan monks, Shan saophas, central Burman gem merchants, poor Chinese, Muslim, or Eurasian schoolboys, and many others. Most of these connections were invisible from the official, colonial, and nationalist perspectives of the time that would ultimately inform the dominant histories. (130)



In chapter six, “Interlude,” the authors pause in their chronicling of Dhammaloka’s biography in order to reflect on his place among the earliest of the European converts to the Buddhist *saṅgha*. Their main purpose seems to be concerned with correcting modern histories by bringing forward their own example of Dhammaloka—the forgotten Irish Buddhist. A common assertion in these histories is to identify Allan Bennett as the first Western Buddhist monk; he joined the Burmese *saṅgha* as Ananda Metteyya at the turn of the twentieth century. But the authors argue that they discovered reports of “dozens” of Westerners, including Dhammaloka, who were ordained around the same time or even before Bennett (131).

However, the authors focus the majority of this chapter on comparing the legacy of Dhammaloka with that of Ananda Metteyya, and with what primarily distinguishes these two men—their class identity. Dhammaloka was of the plebian underclass and devoted his life as monk to the defense and betterment of its members. Ananda Metteyya had a much more privileged background, college-educated in the sciences and a member of the occult Order of the Golden Dawn in London. Both were ordained in Burma, but while Dhammaloka gave public speeches attacking the colonial powers, and sponsored schools for the Asian poor, Metteyya’s “missionary message was couched in scholarly terms and directed primarily to his peers in Europe” (140). Apparently the two men had little if any direct contact, but nevertheless despised each other. Evident in the records provided by the authors, Dhammaloka’s hatred seems to have run much deeper, attacking Metteyya in the press, claiming he was not a legitimate *bhikkhu* and was far removed from the lives of the Burmese, while the latter primarily responded in self-defense. Here, the authors tend to join in Dhammaloka’s personal competition with Metteyya, particularly in terms of their legacies, and in the authors’ quest to determine if Dhammaloka was the first ordained Western Buddhist. Ananda Metteyya has certainly monopolized the attention of scholars of early modern Buddhism, but now that the authors have successfully brought Dhammaloka into the conversation and although the differences between the two men

are certainly worth exploring, arguing over who was most significant, more authentic, or who was first, seems of little importance.

The following chapter, “The Vagabond Traveler’s Account,” reads as another interlude within the entirety of the text, providing a glimpse of Dhammaloka in 1905 that is unique among the authors’ sources. Here we have an opportunity to imagine the actual voice of Dhammaloka as he spoke in personal conversation. This material originates from a 1910 travel book, *A Vagabond Journey Around the World: A Narrative of Personal Experience*, written by the American Harry Alverson Franck. Franck happened to meet with the Irish monk on a train in Calcutta and traveled for some time with him, the monk revealing details (some certainly embellished) of his life, while preaching the merits of Buddhism. Franck chronicled many of his conversations with Dhammaloka, and we are treated to some real gems in the latter’s vernacular endorsements of the Buddha’s Way:

I was a vile curser when I was hoboing in the States and ’twas hard to quit it. But every time I started to say a cuss-word I thought of the revered Gautama and said “blessed” instead, and I’m master of my own tongue, now. (163)

Chapter eight, “A Print Revolution,” picks up the Dhammaloka chronology in May 1907, leaving a one-and-a-half-year gap in source material after October 1905. In September 1907 he launched a new publishing enterprise, the Buddhist Tract Society (BTS), establishing new branches of the Society at several his stops on speaking tours. Although Dhammaloka founded the Society in order to expand his polemical reach, the contents of these materials were primarily from other authors, either reprintings or translations of already published works, or new tracts on rationalism and freethinking. The reach of the society went well beyond Burma, including connections with other freethinking organizations and publications in Canada, the United States, England, and New Zealand. The authors end the chapter attempting to trace the possible influences of freethink-

ing movements in Ireland, Britain, America, and Asia, on Dhammaloka's own intellectual and polemical formation.

In chapter nine, "A Controversial Tour of Ceylon," the authors gather available records from Dhammaloka's 1909 speaking circuit in Sri Lanka, personally sponsored by the Sinhalese revivalist Anagarika Dhammapala, founder of the Maha Bodhi Society. To receive an invitation from such a preeminent figure of the period certainly indicates that Dhammaloka had accrued an impressive reputation as an effective speaker. Over a two-month period, Dhammaloka embarked on a rigorous touring schedule in both urban and rural locales, while dealing with health problems along the way. According to the authors, these talks were "wildly popular," attracting thousands of attendees from a range of ethnic and religious identities (200).

In this chapter the authors provide a number of sample transcripts from Dhammaloka's speeches, providing the most extensive record of his rhetorical style. The authors also had access to Dhammapala's diaries, revealing his own personal experiences of the tour. The primary message of the speeches was similar to the content of Dhammaloka's work in Burma, providing harsh critiques of Christian missionaries who, he argued, buttressed colonialist violence with the Bible's promotion of war and murder. He continued the agenda of the Buddhist Tract Society, encouraging his audiences to join the freethinking Europeans who were starting to turn away from the irrational and infantile message of Christianity. Both Dhammaloka and Dhammapala urged local monks to respond more quickly and directly to the missionary threat by providing public education in order to preserve Ceylon's Buddhist heritage.

Through Dhammapala's diary we also get a more personal glimpse of the tour, due to his working so closely with his counterpart from Burma over an extended period. Unlike Franck's endearing account of time spent in Dhammaloka's company, we find Dhammapala repeatedly frustrated and exhausted, having to confront his guest's often difficult temper.

Dhammaloka was, however, contending with a grueling schedule while also experiencing a decline in his health, and eventually, given the antagonistic content of his speeches, becoming a person of interest for the police. The tour ended abruptly without a clear indication of why this was the case. It may have been because of Dhammaloka's worsening health or, as the authors speculate, he may have secretly stolen out of Ceylon in order to avoid being arrested by the authorities.

The final chapter, "Dhammaloka's Last Years and a Mysterious Death," focuses primarily on sedition charges filed against Dhammaloka in 1910 after his return to Burma. The authors provide evidence that he received a great deal of support among the Burmese populace, not only for his promotion of Buddhism, but also because of his reputation as an outspoken critic of human rights abuses—such as colonial officials living with Burmese women without requiring marriage, and the nonpayment for food or other materials taken from village households. In addition, Chit Hlaing, a prominent founder of the Young Men's Buddhist Association in Moulmein and a future nationalist hero, provided legal representation for Dhammaloka (227).

The court case did seem to limit Dhammaloka's public activities. The authors were unable to uncover any records of the monk over the following year until he finally showed up again in Singapore, still wearing his robes. In March of 1912 he traveled to Melbourne, where he apparently staged his own death, releasing an account of his demise from Beriberi to a newspaper in Calcutta, a piece the authors easily identified as a hoax and penned by Dhammaloka himself.

The remainder of Dhammaloka's biographical trail is rather sparse. In the "Epitaph" of *The Irish Buddhist*, the authors attempt to piece together scant reports gathered between 1912 and 1913. However, the authors could find no further documents regarding their subject's life or his death. They have been left without a clear idea of the time and place of his passing and can only guess at the possible tracks his life took after October of 1913.

The authors end their chapter on “Dhammaloka’s Last Years and Mysterious Death” reflecting on “Why Dhammaloka Matters” (240–249). While recognizing that he at times “played fast and loose with Buddhist tradition” (241), they also found that his activities were governed by identifiable values and principles like temperance, monastic discipline, social justice, and education. Although he was unable to establish a lineage, and his own personal legacy had long been forgotten, the authors contend that this was primarily due to the uncertainties of the early twentieth century, when the future of colonized Asia could not be anticipated, arguing that the experiments and failures of early pioneers of modern Buddhism like Dhammaloka made possible the global reach of the tradition today. Ultimately, the authors conclude that Dhammaloka’s career can be best understood and appreciated in his efforts to forge relationships with a widely diverse pan-Asian Buddhist community, while actively shunning the ethnopolitical divisions endemic to both European imperialism and postcolonial nationalism.

Given the deep and extensive investigation of the elusive subject presented in *The Irish Buddhist*, the readers may in the end still find themselves looking for the Buddhism. There seems to be no record, either verbal or written, of Dhammaloka publicly presenting Dharmic doctrine to his often-large audiences. Leaving the exposition of Dhamma to his fellow monks, he preferred to speak about the decadence of Christian Europe. Yet, as the authors recognize, there is no indication that he took his monastic vows lightly, receiving full ordination and remaining in the *saṅgha* more than likely for the remainder of his life. He may have sincerely found the discipline efficacious, as suggested in his informal conversations with Franck. Indeed, the authors claim, “[t]raining as a monk had been for Dhammaloka a transformative and liberating experience, after a life which he now saw as chaotic and aimless” (241). However, evidenced from his speeches, writings, and the founding of the Buddhist Tract Society, it seems he may have been more freethinker than Buddhist in his personal philosophy. One other result of his ordination that is difficult not to consider is that this transition made possible a hitherto implausible status of

sociopolitical authority. Buddhist ordination provided Dhammaloka with a public platform that would have been implausible if he had remained a plebian drifter, allowing him to openly espouse freethinking and attack colonial Britain while garnering the respect and support of the Burmese populace. This is not to diminish his successes in founding new schools, promoting temperance, or working to build collaborations across Buddhist Asia. In addition, his position as a monk certainly did not fully protect him from the British authorities, given the charges of sedition he faced, as well as evidence suggesting he was attempting at times to evade the police during the last years of his life. Of course, it is impossible to fully determine Dhammaloka's personal motivations, but it is hard to deny the acquired status that ordination would have provided.

Regardless of one's assessment of how Dhammaloka is presented in *The Irish Buddhist*, the opportunity to consider his place in the history of early modern Buddhism would have remained impossible if not for the labors of Turner, Cox, and Bocking. Their shared passion for this once-forgotten monk has provided a significant contribution to the field, and their book should be required reading for any serious scholar of modern Buddhist history. Indeed, after reading *The Irish Buddhist* it is difficult to imagine why historians of Buddhism, not only in the West but in Asia as well, had for so long ignored the singular life of Dhammaloka.