

# The *Wild Irish Girl* and the "dalai lama of little Thibet": the long encounter between Ireland and Asian Buddhism<sup>1</sup>

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## *Introduction*

Ireland lies on the margins of the Buddhist world, far from its homeland in northern India and Nepal and the traditionally Buddhist parts of Asia. It is also in various ways "peripheral" to core capitalist societies, and Irish encounters with Buddhism are structured by both facts. Buddhism, for its part, has been a central feature of major Eurasian societies for over two millennia. During this period, Irish people and Asian Buddhists have repeatedly encountered or heard about each other, in ways structured by many different kinds of global relations – from the Roman Empire and the medieval church via capitalist exploration, imperial expansion and finally contemporary capitalism.

These different relationships have conditioned different kinds of encounters and outcomes. At the same time, as succeeding tides of empire, trade and knowledge have crossed Eurasia, each tide has left its traces. In 1859, Fermanagh-born James Tennent's best-selling *History of Ceylon* could devote four chapters to what was already known about the island in ancient and medieval times – by Greeks and Romans, by "Moors, Genoese and Venetians", by Indian, Arabic and Persian authors and in China. Similarly, the Catholic missionary D Nugent, speaking in Dublin's Mansion House in 1924, could discuss encounters with China from 1291 via the Jesuits to the present.

The Ireland that was connected with the Buddhist world was not, of course, a separate and coherent entity. Like many or most contemporary states, the majority of what was nineteenth-century "Ireland" has only become a separate state within living memory, and one whose cultural and political boundaries remain contested. If authors discussing the arrival of Buddhism in Britain or America (Almond 1988, Tweed 2000) have written as though Victorian Buddhism there was largely an outgrowth of American or British culture, peripheral societies like Ireland have been in no position to remake Buddhism in their "own" (intensely debated) image.

For most of the last five hundred years, Irish encounters with Buddhism have been mediated through competing international affiliations – most powerfully, the British empire and the Catholic church – through shared Anglophone or European publishing spaces, and (going further back) through languages spoken both here and elsewhere. More recently, they have

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<sup>1</sup> This paper reworks material previously published in the *Journal of Global Buddhism* (Cox and Griffin 2009, Cox 2009), which contains a full acknowledgements list. Thanks are due to Cristina Rocha and the *Journal* for permission to reuse this material.

been structured by Ireland's constant cycle of emigration and immigration: until recently it has been rare for Buddhists to be both Irish and in Ireland.

Thus the history of "Buddhism and Ireland" is not a separate national analysis but a window into global histories (comparable to Rocha's 2006 account of Brazilian Zen), where the effective unit of analysis is whatever "world system" (Wallerstein 1988) connects economic, political and cultural activities, from the Roman empire to global capitalism.

## *The paths of first awareness*

These world-systemic relationships, obviously, are historical ones. In 1886, a labourer digging in the bog on the Baltrasna estate in Meath found a bronze statue, about a foot high<sup>2</sup>. Various eminent archaeologists agreed with Miss AG Weld that it was a Sri Lankan Buddha image from the early centuries CE (*Nature* vol. 59, 1899: 163). What this does not tell us is whether it was carried via Roman trading routes from Sri Lanka and to Ireland, or if it was nineteenth-century colonial loot, perhaps stolen again from its new owner.

By the sixth and seventh centuries, the circuits of post-imperial Christianity brought Greek knowledge of Buddhism to Ireland's developing patristic scholarship, in the comments of Origen, Clement and Jerome. The first relevant Irish writer – the ninth-century geographer Dicuil – drew on Alexander's journey to India, which also became familiar in this period via the early Christian historian Orosius and the Middle Irish (tenth or eleventh century) version of the *Alexander legend* (Stoneman 1995).

Past this point, the Barlaam and Josaphat legend, based on the life of the Buddha, was included in Europe's most printed book *The golden legend*, while texts such as Marco Polo's *Travels* and the accounts of contemporary Franciscans, were translated into Irish - as well as English, French and Norse, all spoken on the island, while Irish was an immigrant language in Scotland and Wales and used by monks further afield.

In the early fourteenth century, "James of Ireland" accompanied Odoric of Pordenone to India, Southeast Asia, China and Central Asia. Odoric's account, plagiarised in the fourteenth-century best-seller *Sir John Mandeville*, existed in Ireland in the fifteenth century, in Hakluyt's *Navigations* in the sixteenth and was summarised by Luke Wadding in the seventeenth.

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Irish people could draw both on these earlier accounts and on those of contemporary Jesuits (Offermans 2005), sailors and merchants, published in popular collections of travel narratives. If, then as now, access was structured by literacy, wealth and different languages, nevertheless we have to abandon the view that Buddhism was "news" to Irish people in some recent decade.

When, in 1806, Ireland's first commercial woman writer Sydney Owenson could describe (in her best-selling *The wild Irish girl*) a Catholic parish priest as being like "the dalai lama of little Thibet" (cited in Lennon 2004: 146) she was expressing both the level of knowledge available to *some* Irish people, and the conflicted and opposing cultures present *within* Ireland, which meant that an English-speaking and Protestant culture found the (newly decriminalised) Catholic church as alien and exotic as Tibetan Buddhism.

## International mechanisms of knowledge

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Irish people helped replace this earlier, ethnographic picture with new forms of textual and artefactual knowledge (Lopéz 1995). The British empire was a key part of this: Trinity, Queen's Belfast, Cork and Galway trained young Protestants (and some Catholics) for the imperial administration; on retirement some joined the

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks are due to Brian Bocking for this discovery.

ranks of academic orientalists (Mansoor 1944, Lennon 2004). Irish civil servants in India, such as William Hoey or Vincent Smith, researched the locations of the Buddha's life (Allen 2008), while the China-based Thomas Watters published a two-volume study of Xuanzang's medieval pilgrimage from China to India, the key text for this search.

Protestant (and Catholic) gentlemen, in what can only be called an imperial service class, became military officers, bringing loot from the 1880s conquest of Burma and the Younghusband expedition to Tibet to what is now the National Museum, while smaller categories of museum curator, art collector etc. rounded out the picture. Helen Waddell, later populariser of the goliards, grew up a missionary's daughter in Japan; her play *The spoiled Buddha* was produced in Belfast Opera House in 1915 (Burleigh 2005).

The "other ranks" of the British army and navy recruited massively in Catholic Ireland and Irish Scotland (Bartlett 1997), while from the start of the twentieth century a boom in vocations led to very large numbers of Irish missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, working in China in particular (Boland 2005), with the consequence that Buddhism became an object of study for Irish religious institutions, and Irish people were extensively mobilized to support these missionary efforts.

Thus Irish knowledge about Asian Buddhism – in newspaper reports, popular literature, sermons and museums – was part and parcel of processes of power (Said 2003). As elsewhere in Europe, however, dissidents from the Enlightenment to the counter culture also used this knowledge to critique locally dominant culture (Clarke 1997). Lennon (2004) identifies a tradition of drawing parallels between Ireland and Asian countries, underlining a similar position with relation to metropolitan culture and empire.

Thus the first Irish Buddhists encountered Buddhism through the structures of British empire and Catholic "spiritual empire", and the related cultural conflict within Ireland - a conflict which led to partial political independence, the collapse of the Anglo-Irish as landed aristocracy and imperial service class, and an ongoing sectarianism on both sides of the new border which has remained determining for what it means to be Buddhist, and Irish or in Ireland (rarely both) until the start of the twenty first century. In particular, Buddhism has offered a way of dissenting from this world of local sectarianisms and global empire-building, and an identification with something outside these terms: a "going native" both for those born Anglo-Irish and for those born plebeian Catholics.

### *The first Irish Buddhists*

Irish Buddhist history is not short: the first (anonymous) Irish Buddhist was recorded in 1871, at roughly the same time as the first Irish practitioner in Japan. By the late 1890s the first Irish person had been ordained in Burma. In Ireland, the first talk by a Buddhist took place in 1889, the first visit by ordained Asian Buddhists in 1925 and the first explicitly Buddhist celebration in 1929.

These first Irish Buddhists appeared, above all, as marginal. In roughly chronological order we find an anonymous statistic, an eccentric, a fictional character, an exile, an adventurer, a rabble-rouser, a race traitor, a radical, a transsexual, a fraud and a raconteur. The pejoratives through

which their contemporaries saw them underlines the marginality of these exceptional individuals to the conservative and sectarian Ireland of their day.

Up to now we have highlighted Ireland's peripherality and involvement in world-systems processes. The reverse of this coin is the intensive effort of boundary-creation, identity formation and policing of difference that increasingly defined ethnicity in this decisive period. After the bloody suppression of the 1798 uprising and the 1800 Act of Union, a series of mass movements – Catholic Emancipation, Home Rule, the Land War and finally independence – marked an increasing rejection by the Catholic peasants and middle classes of British rule and the local Anglo-Irish ruling class; a resistance which in turn led to frequent attempts at reasserting control, and powerful counter-movements from Ulster Protestants in particular. The revival of the Catholic church in the post-Famine period, and simultaneous cultural nationalist movements, were part and parcel of this process of creating cultural and religious division.

Rocha has argued (2006: 7) that "the adoption of Buddhism in Catholic countries, such as France and Italy, should be differentiated from its adoption in Protestant ones". What stands out for the Irish case until the 1960s, however, is this role of *sectarianism* in the reception of Buddhism.<sup>3</sup>

In the period when the future Catholic nationalist elite was being formed, even Catholic nationalists working in solidarity with Indian ones could not draw *religious* (as opposed to political or economic) parallels (Lennon 2004). It was thus mostly from the declining Anglo-Irish imperial service class that it was possible for a handful of individuals, mostly male and well-educated, and (crucially) already very disconnected from their own families and backgrounds, to defect from an identity in the process of decomposition; while the known Catholic-born Buddhists were political radicals from anti-clerical traditions (Cox 2010c).

Elsewhere (Cox 2010b) we have explored early Irish Buddhism in Asia as part of anti-colonial solidarity; here it is enough to remind ourselves that the stage on which religious choices were being made was not an eternal, traditional, Catholic Ireland but rather a world shaped by empire and anti-imperial struggles, by the formation of ethno-religious identities in Dublin and Glasgow, Belfast and the Punjab, Rangoon and Tokyo – and by the radical and socialist critique of religion.

## Eleven Buddhists in search of a home

At the present state of knowledge, Irish Buddhism before 1970 is mostly known through individual lives. While a brief account of these is helpful, this is a window into the broader picture of those who did not leave records or whom we have not yet discovered. This point is highlighted by the anonymity of Buddhists within Ireland.

The first Irish Buddhist appeared as a County Dublin statistic in the 1871 census – given the date, most probably a university teacher or student; around the same period (1873) the *Dublin*

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<sup>3</sup> In a broader perspective, France and Italy are better described as pillarised societies, in Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) sense, with centuries-long conflicts between Catholic, secular-liberal and socialist cultures. The question of the adoption of Buddhism within the secular and socialist subcultures of western Europe has yet to be researched.

*University Magazine* published a largely sympathetic article on "Buddhism and its founder". From this point on, there were between one and three Buddhists in Ireland in the 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911 censuses, but identification is at present impossible.<sup>4</sup> This period also saw a "moral panic" among Catholic and Protestant theologians alike at the prospect of Europeans converting to Buddhism, a panic reflected in, for example, the *Dublin Review* as early as 1890.

While there is no reason to believe that Buddhists disappeared when detailed census records were no longer taken (when they resumed, in 1991, there were 986 in the Republic alone), it would not be for another 100 years (1972) that any Irish person would "out" themselves as Buddhist *in Ireland*; an indication of the perceived social costs of stepping outside the framework of sectarian religion and its associated institutions.

No such constraints bothered Captain C. Pfoundes, an Irish officer who had travelled to East Asia during the second Opium War (1856-60) and subsequently remained in Japan, claiming to have spent eight or nine years in a Buddhist monastery and to have been initiated into the fire ritual within both the Tendai and Shingon orders. An enthusiastic Orientalist, he penned many articles on the subject for newspapers and learned journals between the 1870s and 1890s, worked for the (Japanese) Buddhist Propagation Society and strongly opposed Christian missionaries.

The best-known Irish Buddhist to posterity is far more plebeian if equally military in origin: Kipling's *Kim* (1900 – 1), the son of an Irish soldier and an Irish nursemaid in India, brought up to bazaar life. Kim is represented as torn between two souls – a practical and cynical "English" one working for the spymasters of the Raj, and a romantic and "Indian" one whose guru is a moderately orthodox Tibetan Gelugpa lama, inspired by western accounts of the then Panchen lama (Franklin 2008, Kwon 2007).

Kim is of course a fictional character, but stands in for the reality of imperial lives in India, where civil servants and soldiers of all ranks took local wives, as did (less visibly) missionaries. Whether such arrangements – and their religious implications – were permanent or dissolved on return home, most produced no records. Nevertheless, "going native" is the main possibility for attested Irish Buddhists of this period (that is, those who published their stories); in this sense Kim imaginatively represents the unknown number of those who did not.

Lafcadio Hearn, Buddhist sympathiser and interpreter of "old Japan" to the west (and to its modernising, Meiji self) was the son of an Anglo-Irish soldier who married a Greek woman; he came to Ireland with his mother until she returned home. Brought up by an Irish aunt (who having married a Catholic was kept at a distance by the rest of the family), he was sent to boarding schools before being sent to seek his fortune in the USA at 17; two decades later, he travelled to Japan, where he lies buried at Jitoin Kobudera temple in Tokyo (Ronan 1997).

Hearn's Buddhist sympathies are highlighted in Rexroth (1977) and Tweed (2000); what I want to emphasise here is the significance of this "going native" beyond the empire for the son of an Anglo-Irish soldier, as well as the fractured family life and sense of place caused precisely by

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<sup>4</sup> The 1901 census lists a female Buddhist in Co. Dublin, a male "Hindoo Buddhist" in Munster and a male in Galway, for example.

Ireland's place in international processes (the British army in Greece) and by sectarianism (the division within the Hearn family).

A comparable "going native" can be seen in Hearn's near-contemporary J. Bowles Daly, an Anglican-born journalist and Theosophist who had written on Buddhist education in Ceylon and joined Col. Olcott there as a leading figure in developing the Buddhist Theosophical Society schools – in competition with missionary schools - between 1890 and 1893, becoming the first principal of Mahinda College in Rajagiriya (Olcott 1889, Dharmadasa 1992). Daly was a supporter of modernized Buddhist education, provided by the laity with government subsidy, against both the Christian mission schools and traditional temple-based education. After falling out with Olcott he remained active and visited 1300 monasteries as a commissioner for the laicisation of monastery landholdings (Dennis 1897). He formally converted to Buddhism in 1890.

One of the most remarkable of these early figures is the Burmese-ordained U Dhammaloka, possibly born Lawrence O'Rourke in Dublin<sup>5</sup>. We say "possibly" because he used multiple aliases, after a period as migrant labourer or "hobo" in the US prior to his arrival in Asia. As a Buddhist monk, from perhaps the early 1890s to the early 1910s, he was very popular among Asian Buddhists for his polemic attacks on Christian missionaries (he was closely allied to Western free-thinkers) and faced trial for sedition, while active as an international organiser in Burma, Singapore, Japan, and probably elsewhere, founding institutions, organising preaching tours and translating rationalist texts such as Paine's *Age of Reason*. Dhammaloka exemplifies a plebeian, Catholic-born and secularist route to Buddhism which in our view has been underplayed in gentry-focussed accounts of its early history<sup>6</sup> (Cox 2009, 2010b).

A later Irish figure in Burma is Maurice Collis, a Killiney-born civil servant whose sympathies with Burmese cultural nationalism and refusal to treat "whites" differently from "natives" led to his forced resignation and a successful second career as a writer focussing on the Asian encounter with European colonisers. Collis' sympathy with Buddhism was that of love for the magical world of Burmese peasants, although his politics highlighted a rational anti-colonialism in keeping with his urban Burmese friends: at home on leave in 1931, he introduced Burmese nationalists to the republican Maud Gonne McBride, Treaty signatory Robert Barton and AE (Derné and Jadwin 2006).

Meanwhile, in Russia, the Communist Patrick Breslin, who holds the unenviable distinction of being one of only three Irish victims of Stalin's purges, had rejected Catholicism at the age of 14, associating initially with astrologer and Theosophist Cyril Fagan in Dublin and later defending spiritualist propositions at the Lenin School in Moscow (McLoughlin 2007). Like his Russian wife, who had had an epiphany at the Tibetan Buddhist temple in Petersburg, he retained a strong interest in Buddhism, which died with him in the gulag.

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Bocking (UCC), Alicia Turner (York University) and Laurence Cox are carrying out research on Dhammaloka, some of which will appear in a forthcoming special issue of *Contemporary Buddhism*.

<sup>6</sup> We should also mention here the Burmese-ordained Irish monk U Visudha, noted by historians of the Indian *dalit* movement as having performed a mass conversion ceremony in South India in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kshirasagara 1994: 281).

Laura / Michael Dillon is best known to history as the world's first female-to-male transsexual by plastic surgery (Hodgkinson 1989, Kennedy 2007). Dillon shared with Hearn (and Kim) a fractured family background and with Daly and Breslin a prior interest in theosophy. Of Anglo-Irish aristocratic family, he studied in Cambridge as a woman before the Second World War and returned to Ireland to qualify in medicine as a man while undergoing pioneering (and then-illegal) surgery in Britain. He developed a deep interest in philosophical and spiritual questions, writing among other things an early work on transsexuality (Dillon 1946).

While working as ship's doctor in 1958, he was "outed" by the British tabloid press and fled to India, where he made contact with Asian Buddhists. He was ordained first as a Theravadin *sramanera*, then (when his sex change prevented full ordination) as a Tibetan Buddhist novice, attached to the (Gelugpa) Rizong monastery in Ladakh and writing a series of Buddhist works (Jivaka 1962, 1994). Lobzang Jivaka, as he became, demands respect not only for his difficult personal life but also for his conscious wish to tackle his own racism: he refused special treatment in the monastery, subjecting himself to Tibetan teenagers' monastic seniority and to food and living conditions which probably contributed to his death at forty-seven.

T. Lobsang Rampa, author of *The Third Eye* and other works, is justly famous (see e.g. Lopez 1998) in the history of western Buddhism as a commercially successful fraud. After publication of the book but prior to his "unmasking" as Cyril Hoskin, Scotland Yard had requested a Tibetan passport or residence permit, leading him to move to Ireland, where Dillon provided a house.

Rampa, his wife and their friend Sheelagh Rouse lived there for some years before moving to Canada: he subsequently dedicated *The Rampa Story* to "his friends in Howth... for the Irish people know persecution, and they know how to judge Truth" (1960: 3). Despite Rampa's inauthenticity, most observers judge him personally sincere, and this house has a good claim to being the first Buddhist community in Ireland; similarly, the shamrock Buddhas that he sold from this address may yet prove to be the first Buddhist practice in Ireland, at least for a given value of "Buddhist" and "practice".

Finally, we should mention Terence Gray, an Anglo-Irish aristocrat who had a distinguished career in theatre at Cambridge between the wars (in what is now the Cambridge Buddhist Centre) and a colourful personal life (marrying a Rimsky-Korsakov and later a Georgian princess (Cornwell 2004)). In 1958, he retired to Monte Carlo and became a regular correspondent of the London Buddhist Society's *Middle Way* (Humphreys 1968) as well as writing a series of Buddhist books as "Wei Wu Wei", seven of which are still in print with Wisdom Books. His Buddhism is a very literary "philosophy of life" in some ways comparable to Alan Watts' and combining Zen with Taoism.

## Reflections

The picture given above parallels Roberts' (2009) analysis of Irish astrology (and indeed the history of Irish Theosophy), in suggesting a greater interest in alternative religion in the years before independence and an increasing closure of Irish society, north and south, subsequently. This distinction should not be exaggerated, however: from 1871 to 1971 no-one, as far as we know, publicly identified themselves as Irish, as Buddhist, and in Ireland.



If the stories above appear those of marginal characters, this is precisely the point: by comparison with Almond's or Tweed's Victorian Buddhism, minor and subordinate parts of their own cultures, "Buddhism" and "Ireland" were almost impossible to hold together. What we find instead are defectors from the imperial service class, "going native" in Japan, Ceylon, Burma or Ladakh and stepping outside both their own local culture and imperial arrangements.

The pressures involved are underlined by two counter-examples. Firstly, several Buddhist parties visited Ireland in these years. In 1889, 1894 and apparently 1896, the indefatigable Col. Olcott toured the country discussing both Theosophy and Buddhism, exciting much controversy, but (as far as can be ascertained) leaving no Buddhist organisations or individuals.<sup>7</sup> In 1929, the Unitarian minister and Buddhist sympathiser Will Hayes, a friend of Christmas Humphreys, gave a week-long lecture series in Dublin, again with no visible effects. Finally, six "dancing lamas" (Hansen 1996) were brought to Ireland in 1925 by the partly-Irish team who had filmed *The epic of Everest* – but as entertainment alone.

Secondly, Theosophy, a key matrix for both British and American Buddhism, was a flourishing force throughout this period, which involved among others WB Yeats, AE (George Russell) and James Stephens. However, the Irish Society avoided Buddhism almost entirely, developing an interest in esoteric Christianity, Irish folklore and Hinduism instead. For the largely Anglo-Irish Theosophists, these choices made possible continuing relevance and engagement in *Irish* politics in the age of independence.

To be Buddhist, by contrast, was to step out of the conflict (and the country) – and the two known Irish "Buddhist Theosophists" did just that. As we have seen, Bowles Daly took his interest to Ceylon. Meanwhile William Judge, co-founder of the Society internationally and head of the American section, did indeed take a more "Buddhist" line in his journal – but had emigrated at age twelve. Anti-imperialist Buddhists were typically focussed on politics in Asia, whether as opinion (Pfoundes, Hearn) or as action (Dhammaloka, Collis, Breslin).

Thus the key features of Irish Buddhism in this period are, firstly, that it was caught between the two opposing cultures of rising Catholic nationalism and the rearguard actions of the Anglo-Irish imperial service class; and, secondly, that it was played out on the global stage created by the institutions of the British empire in particular. It was anything other than a debate within a unitary and bounded national culture.

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<sup>7</sup> There is a tantalising possibility that the "Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland", founded in 1908, may have meant the "and Ireland" seriously: in 1922 W. Fowkes appears as Irish representative to a London meeting discussing the founding of an International Buddhist Union, while around the same period the Society covered his "propaganda" expenses from its publication fund. Earlier, in 1903, the minor literary figure Ramsay Colles was listed as being the Dublin representative of the Maha Bodhi society. To date, however, nothing more is known of either relationship.

*A new beginning:  
the multiple foundations of contemporary Buddhism in Ireland*

If the previous period marks a broken or hidden tradition, the continuous, semi-visible tradition of Buddhism in Ireland dates from the late 1960s and has its origins in the new Catholic public-sector service class. On the nationalist and Catholic side, the transmission belts of knowledge about Buddhism were typically those of "spiritual empire", to use a phrase of the day.

Since the foundation of the Maynooth Mission to China in 1918, over 1500 missionaries from the Columban order alone went overseas (Boland 2005: 132), part of a much broader wave of religious vocations and religious emigration stretching back to the late nineteenth century. The Mission's paper, *The Far East*, was sold by boys in Cork as late as the 1950s (Bernard Murphy, pers. comm.) This fits into the broader popularity of, for example, St Francis Xavier, Jesuit missionary to Buddhists in India and Japan, whose name adorns many Irish youth centres.

Maynooth's library shows a continuing and sophisticated interest in Buddhism in the country's central seminary as well as in donations and bequests from priests around the country. The key periods are between the 1920s and 1940s, no doubt reflecting the missionary effort, and from the 1970s onwards, presumably reflecting a response to new religious movements. In terms of popular culture, a survey of the Irish media shows a continuing awareness of Buddhism, whether as opponent in missionary efforts or as an exotic feature of foreign parts.

By contrast with Brazil, where the Church's secularisation has led to its losing ground among the poor (Rocha 2006: 104-5), the (highly conservative) Irish church lost its "moral monopoly" (Inglis 1998) as a result of second-wave feminism, and more recently the politics of memory as large-scale institutional abuse of children has become the subject of documentaries, court cases and national tribunals. Thus the primary search for Irish ex-Catholics has been for forms of religious expression which have not been forms of religious control of bodies and emotions.

## Historical trajectories

Nattier's (1998) three-way typology of Buddhism in the west has been criticised for drawing overly sharp distinctions (see Numrich 2003). For Ireland, it does adequately describe three very different historical trajectories: "import Buddhism" brought by people living in Ireland, "export Buddhism" driven by teachers from abroad, and "baggage Buddhism" arriving as part of migrants' cultures. It may be a feature of the relative youth of the Irish *sangha* that these boundaries have not yet broken down in the way that they have done elsewhere.

An alternative reading is that in a peripheral context the key linkages of Buddhism in Ireland are not *internal* ones. Irish Buddhism, in this sense, is still "dependent": on international Buddhist organisations, on the networks of ethnic Buddhist diasporas, or on global distribution chains of "Mind-body-spirit" literature and CDs. This dependency undermines cross-Buddhist communication, of which there has been very little. The sense of local isolation and global connectedness brought about by this peripherality has marked Irish Buddhism from the start:

"One person had put up a notice in what was called the 'East West Centre' ... saying that they were interested in Buddhism and was there anyone else in Dublin who was? And

after that, I guess about ten or fifteen people came together, and all of those people at that time had thought that they were the only Buddhists in Ireland" (interview A)<sup>8</sup>.

Nattier's categories, in other words, are useful because they highlight the global relationships in the transmission of Buddhism which still remain determining for contemporary Irish Buddhism.

## Import Buddhism

In the late 1960s and early 1970s a new Buddhist-sympathetic counter-culture developed in Dublin, including vegetarian and macrobiotic restaurants, alternative bookshops and martial arts. For Catholic participants who later became Buddhists, what showed the way was personal reading, often at secondary school, of literature published in the UK and US – despite the orthodoxy of school or family. This fed into travel abroad, bringing back literature unavailable in Ireland, and into Buddhist retreats in the UK.

Indeed the oldest surviving Buddhist organisation<sup>9</sup>, Kagyu Samye Dzong in west Dublin, came out of the reflection that "we thought maybe it would be cheaper to pay for one teacher to come over than everybody going over somewhere else, so we got together and we did organise many visits with monks and nuns" (interview B). This group, founded in 1977, organised between 100 and 150 visits by teachers in its early years, starting with Tibetan lamas but also including some western Theravadin-trained teachers (Ani Tsondru, pers. comm.)

Insofar as there was ever an *elite* import Buddhism, of the kind familiar from the UK and US, this was it. Rather than being strongly committed to a single tradition, however, it was "very certainly multid denominational, not even that, but just a bunch of people who were meeting with an interest in Buddhism" (interview A).

A similar situation holds for the Zen Meditation Group (now Insight Meditation Group); founded by Dominican father Philip McShane, this always contained both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. In its early years, it invited Soto Zen teachers from Throssel Hole in the UK, while in the 1980s it increasingly invited Theravadin teachers from the Birmingham Buddhist Vihara and Amaravati (Kelly 1990).

One key difference between this import Buddhism and the kind described by Nattier, of course, is that the organizers of these groups did not themselves engage in long-term training in Asia aiming at certification and teaching at home – a situation which undoubtedly builds commitment to a single approach. As we shall see, such people existed, but rarely returned to Ireland. Rather, these were groups initially dominated by lay practitioners, with considerable control over the invitation of teachers and the direction of their own centres.

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<sup>8</sup> The three interviews cited in this section were carried out in 2008 with people who have been involved in Buddhism in Ireland since the 1970s.

<sup>9</sup> The first known Buddhist organisation (in 1971) was a college society at the then New University in Coleraine. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the time and place, it does not seem to have survived.

If imported knowledge, through UK and US publishing circuits, long-distance travel, retreats abroad and now the Internet, remains important in Ireland, it has rarely led to new institutional foundations. What it has produced, as Wendy Jermyn's (unfortunately unpublished) research has shown, is a proliferation of informal, essentially private, groups of practitioners: for example, a group who meet to listen to CDs of Thich Nhat Hanh and meditate in a private house.

At a rough estimate (based on the levels of activity of publicly organised Buddhism and the numbers of non-Asian Buddhists in Ireland), such informal groups, along with more isolated or "night-stand" Buddhists (Tweed 2002), account for at least a third, and perhaps as much as half, of all Irish Buddhists.

Such groups, like the earlier foundations, retain a greater sense of independence vis-à-vis their sources of Buddhist teaching and practice; experience suggests that far from being the elite Nattier predicts (1998: 189), these more recent groups (and individual night-stand Buddhists) are less educated, more dependent on commercial distribution sources, and more likely to be women than Buddhists involved in the export groups, whose stronger organisational hierarchies (necessitated among other things by a dependency on organizations or lineages based close at hand in Western Europe) and tighter approaches to doctrine and practice give greater scope to a particular kind of service-class careerism, and to men.

The major condition for these developments is the prior arrival of Buddhism in more powerful (politically, economically, culturally) countries, from which it can now be diffused successfully in an Irish market which is increasingly part of a global one.

## Export Buddhism

Export Buddhism in Ireland, then, is different not only in its historical origins (which are very recent – less than two decades in most cases) but also its sources. Rather than Asian missionaries, its typical carriers are westerners, themselves often mainly or exclusively trained in the west. In global terms, this is a second generation of western Buddhist foundations, with their own characteristics.

The key feature of these is the central role of "blow-ins", missionaries from other European countries. Thus Marjo Oosterhoff from the Netherlands (Passaddhi Meditation Centre, arrived 1990), Dharmachari Sanghapala from the UK FWBO (Dublin Meditation Centre, arrived 1991), Alain Liebmann from France, trained by Taisen Deshimaru (Galway Zen Centre, arrived 1991) and others arrived to set up centres as offshoots or successors of traditions already implanted elsewhere in Europe. Perhaps the earliest of these was the now-defunct Dao Shonu centre in Meath, founded by American followers of Chögyam Trungpa in the 1980s and 1990s (Ryan 1996: 120 – 1).

A borderline case is that of Peter and Harriet Cornish (Cornish 2007), who moved to Ireland from Britain in the early 1970s, initially practicing within Chögyam Trungpa's tradition. The Cornishes offered what is now the Dzogchen Beara centre to Sogyal Rimpoche when he visited in 1986. (An attempt in 1969 to set up a Tibetan centre in Westport foundered on immigration restrictions.)

The role of "blow-ins" in the Irish counter culture is well known and extends to many fields, ranging from the New Age (Kuhling 2004) to organic farming (Moore 2003). Following the traditional definitions noted at the start of this chapter, Ireland remains very clearly "border country": only a couple of traditions have held any ordinations in Ireland, for example.

More generally, it has taken a long time for Irish people to take leadership or teaching positions in export groups, if at all. Thus in Dzogchen Beara, senior Irish students act as "presenters", leading groups and presenting videos, but they "are not really teachers in their own right" (Matt Padwick, pers. comm.). In the (FWBO) Dublin Meditation Centre, the first Irish-born teacher, trained in Britain, arrived in 1993; the first Irish-trained teacher, ordained in 1998, left for Brazil; the first Irish-trained teacher to stay and teach was as late as 2001. The "import" Kagyu Samye Dzong, by contrast, had its first two Irish teachers in the 1980s and 1990s respectively.

In terms of peripherality, this situation contrasts sharply with the large number of Irish-born Buddhists who trained abroad and did not return. Thus Paul Haller, abbot in 2007 of the San Francisco Zen Centre, comes from west Belfast and was ordained in Thailand (Breen 2007); Finian Airton from Dublin was ordained in Throssel Hole around 1984; Ratnaghosa, chair of the London Buddhist Centre between 1994 and 2003, grew up in Kildare (Ratnaghosa n.d.) Most famously, Maura O'Halloran, after studying in Trinity, received Dharma transmission in Japan shortly before her death in 1982 (O'Halloran 1995). Examples could be multiplied.

The point is *not* that Irish teachers were excluded by blow-ins, but rather that it remained, until the turn of the twenty first century, extremely hard to be Irish, and Buddhist, and in Ireland (in 1991, only 264 Irish passport-holders identified as Buddhist in the Republic; by 2006 this number had increased almost tenfold, to 2175).

As with other counter-cultural activities, to be foreign meant being granted a certain leeway in one's lifestyle which was not offered to Catholic-born Irish people. One British-born Buddhist recounts

When I still lived in Inchicore, an elderly lady came up ... on the street, you know 'are you a Protestant or a Catholic?' – 'Well, actually, I'm a Buddhist'. And she said 'ooh, it's alright dear, so long as you're a Christian'. (interview A).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, in Northern Ireland, where sectarian tensions have remained stronger, being Buddhist "at home" has been particularly difficult until very recent years. Even in the Republic, Irish Buddhists still often have church weddings and funerals for family reasons.

The "export Buddhist" groups cover the whole spectrum of Buddhism: of the fourteen most organised groups in Ireland, five are broadly Theravadin (including *vipassana*), three Mayahana, five Tibetan and one western (Dharmachari Akshobin, pers. comm.)

Nattier predicts correctly that these groups will be evangelical in orientation (1998: 189), but is wrong (at least for Ireland) in expecting greater ethnic diversity (except via these groups' international connections). Nor are they more plebeian: the intellectual consistency involved in acquiring a new ideology and defending its boundaries in the "spiritual marketplace" requires a higher degree of cultural capital than "shopping around".

## Baggage Buddhism

In the censuses of the 1990s and 2000s, those identifying as Buddhist in the Republic broke down more or less evenly between those of Irish and other "western" nationality, and Buddhists from Asian countries. Except for mainland Chinese converts to Falun Gong, most Asian Buddhists were presumably born into Buddhism.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Vietnamese "quota refugees" arrived under UNHCR programmes. Of these, some were Catholic, others Buddhist and others again from the Vietnamese Chinese community (Maguire 2004). At some point in the 1990s, the Buddhists were able to sustain a temple in a Dublin suburb. The only other "ethnic Buddhist" group combining this length of presence with a similar organisational capacity is Soka Gakkai, which includes western and Japanese adherents more successfully than most Buddhist groups. This too was able for a time to sustain a temple in suburban Dublin, but has now reverted to private practice (Wendy Cox, pers. comm.)<sup>10</sup>

Particular mention must be made of Chinese immigrants from the mainland, Taiwan and the diaspora (especially Malaysia), who comprise about half of the Asian Buddhist population. While Chinese New Year has some history in Ireland, the only visible organisation with any claim to be Buddhist is the well-organised Falun Dafa / Falun Gong. This is present in New Age circuits; its free paper *Epoch Times* is available in Irish supermarkets; and it holds regular public protests about the treatment of Falun Gong practitioners in China<sup>11</sup>.

Otherwise, a combination of very low immigration rates until the late 1990s, small absolute numbers of most Buddhist ethnicities (in the dozens or hundreds in most cases) and global downturn make the development of formal ethnic Buddhist institutions problematic. (In 2009, however, the Thai community organised a public Wesak celebration). The most likely route is affiliation to existing, import or export, foundations. Anecdotal evidence suggests that tentative moves are being made in this direction.

## Creolisation and not-just-Buddhists

Finally, we should mention, as Tweed (2002: 28 – 29) observes, not only Buddhist sympathisers (as in earlier periods), but also "night-stand Buddhists", "Dharma-hoppers", "lukewarm Buddhists" and "non-just Buddhists"; what Rocha (2006) describes as multiple affiliations and forms of creolisation.

Where Irish people appropriate Buddhism for themselves, within largely self-directed and informal organisations (or as a purely private matter), their own cultural orientations towards religion naturally play a key role. As one teacher observes, "we have Irish Catholic Buddhists, Irish Catholic pagans, Irish Catholic atheists..." (Dharmachari Sanghapala, pers. comm.) who deploy the vocabulary of Buddhism (etc.) within a largely Catholic grammar.

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<sup>10</sup> The Thai community now holds annual Wesak celebrations with the support of the London consulate.

<sup>11</sup> There are, however, occasional reports of Chinese people from Buddhist backgrounds forming study groups or otherwise becoming interested in mainstream Buddhism while in Ireland. See also O'Leary and Li (2007).

Particular pressures are exerted by tribal affiliation. Religious affiliation remains central to many aspects of life in Ireland, formally and informally: schools and hospitals have with few exceptions an explicitly religious ethos; marriages and funerals are typically religious; confirmation and first communion are major events; and so on. Coulter (1993) documents, in relation to feminism, how only those university-trained liberal feminists with independent careers were able to set themselves openly against and outside the Catholic church. For working-class women's groups, the church was (and sometimes still remains) a central part of family and community, and one which they cannot do without. These pressures also impact on Irish Buddhism.

As Catholicism's "moral monopoly" (Inglis 1998) slowly loses its power, at least for those with the resources to stand outside it, what increasingly replaces it as a pressure on "night-stand Buddhists" are the interpretations offered through consumer culture, be it the "mind-body-spirit" section of high street bookshops, the sub-Buddhist material in "angel shops" or workshops advertised in health food stores. To this extent, import Buddhism could equally be described as a collection of audience cults (Stark and Bainbridge 1985), at times developing into client cults around teachers based abroad.

These experiences – of creolisation or multiple affiliations – are not restricted to working-class women: one long-standing and well-educated male Buddhist writes

"I have always been aware that my interest in Buddhism may be rather superficial, and I am not a good or committed practitioner! However, I remain a sympathiser and an admirer, often reading Buddhist literature. But I haven't attended Buddhist teachings in recent years. Moreover, I retain a certain Christian faith and practice, and have an interest in some of the teachings of Islam".

The origins of this import Buddhism are eclectic, both in the encounter between Christianity and Buddhism, and in the counter culture of the 1960s and 1970s. For Britain, Cush suggests that the counter culture was important for western Buddhists in the 1970s and faded from view in the 1980s, while the 1990s "New Age" saw a revival of counter-cultural orientations (Cush 1993: 195 - 6). Similarly, Vishvapani writes,

"the New Age is where people start looking when they want an alternative to conventional society... Buddhists might see the New Age as a kind of contemporary ethnic religion which can co-exist with Western Buddhism as tribal and national traditions co-exist with Eastern Buddhism" (1994: 21).

Relationships with Catholicism show similar features: in the 1970s and 1980s there developed a substantial interest, particularly in Christian-Zen dialogue and the adoption of Asian practices within Christian spirituality (see Hughes 1997). This has declined under the watchful eye of Cardinal Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, but may revive in future. The bulk of Irish Buddhists will, for the foreseeable future, have been brought up Catholic, so that Buddhist organisations in Ireland will continue to have to engage with people's religious socialisation, and individuals will still have to negotiate these identities for themselves. As with Rocha's Brazilian Zen practitioners,

"the vast majority of the people interviewed were Catholics before they started to 'shop around' in the religious marketplace and find Zen Buddhism." (2006: 118).

Finally, a refusal to identify as Buddhist may also be a conscious, thought-out Buddhist position:

"I had this debate with myself at one stage about calling myself a Buddhist or not, because it's almost unBuddhist to call yourself Buddhist, particularly because they're labeling and they're categorizing" (interview C).

Fieldwork in the 1990s Dublin counter culture identified as key themes autonomy and reflexivity in all aspects of one's life (Cox 1999); this refusal of categorisation is no doubt related. As the long history of sectarianism in Ireland finally wanes, there are more general reactions against religious identification: the last thing many Irish people want to do is to repeat their own experience of sectarian upbringing. Interest in the idea of a Buddhist school, for example, has been virtually zero. Statistics based on practice rather than self-identification might thus show rather more Irish people who are Buddhist, or part-Buddhist<sup>12</sup>.

### *Conclusion: the future of Irish Buddhism*

Ireland's long encounter with Buddhism has always been determined by global processes, whether the circuits of medieval Christianity and early modern collections of travel narratives, involvement in the British and "spiritual" empires, UK and US publishing, "blow-ins" from west European counter cultures or immigration from Buddhist Asia. Until recently, the most central feature of "Irish culture" in relation to Buddhism has been that the conflict *between* Irish cultures has largely squeezed out alternative religious options at home.

As late as 1991, there were only 986 self-identified Buddhists in the Republic, about 0.025% of the population. By 2002 the figure was 3,894 (about 0.1 percent) and by 2006 it was 6,516 (about 0.15 percent), making it the third-largest religion after Christianity and Islam. These twenty first century figures are in line with Baumann's (2001) European estimates for the late 1990s, albeit on the low end of the spectrum. They divide roughly evenly in all three censuses between converts (assumed to be those of Irish and other western nationality) and those born Buddhist (assumed to be those of Asian nationality). Thus along with a rise in immigration, there is an equally significant rise in conversion (paralleled by that to other non-established religions and non-religious categories, with over 40,000 people objecting to *both* the questions on religion and ethnicity). Is this the "end of history"?

Buddhism has certainly become far more visible, and publicly accepted, over the last decade. No doubt this is linked to the collapse of the Catholic church's moral authority in particular, in the face of scandals over child sexual abuse, the broader carceral society of industrial schools and Magdalen laundries, and the contemporary church's response to survivors and legal inquiries. If not quite "the end of history", this has certainly marked the end of the comfortable assumption that most Irish people can be safely counted as Catholic. Buddhism has moved from a hidden allegiance to a public one; put another way, as the church's power to constrain public participation weakens, so too public (and hence researchable) religious practice has diversified.

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<sup>12</sup> Rocha notes (2006: 109) that Brazilians will often identify as Catholic on census forms because they are baptised. A similar situation applies in Ireland, although here the key point is that "Protestant" and "Catholic" are widely understood as *ethnic* categories.



Global recession has effects of its own. Substantial numbers of recent immigrants have left the country, although events in China in particular may offset this, and indeed lead to a growth in Falun Gong in particular. Conversely, recession is often the point when other immigrants decide to stay, and may take a greater interest in questions of religious, linguistic etc. identity for the sake of the second generation.

Racial intolerance is rising – most visibly in the referendum denying citizenship to children of foreign parents born in Ireland – and this is likely to intensify the process where "night-stand Buddhists" in particular separate out interest in Buddhism from contact or solidarity with actual Asian people. Buddhist *organisations* are likely to find the number of skilled volunteers rise in a recession – but younger educated people are more likely to emigrate elsewhere.

Buddhism in Ireland remains, as it has always been, structurally dependent on global relationships. Until Asian Buddhists in Ireland can bridge the gap to English-language Buddhist organisations (and vice versa) they will remain dependent on organisations abroad. The Irish franchises of international Buddhist organisations will remain so in the foreseeable future, as training and ordination resources in Ireland are beyond the reach of all but the largest groups. And "import Buddhists" will remain dependent on the various circuits of international publishing, touring teachers, Internet ordering and so on. To this extent, Ireland is likely to remain a "border country" of the Dharma for a long time to come.

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