

Title	Representing Sikhism: Essays in memory of the Irish scholar Max Arthur Macauliffe
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Publication date	2017
Original Citation	Shackle, C. and Bocking, B. (2017) Representing Sikhism: essays in memory of the Irish scholar Max Arthur Macauliffe. Journal of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions, 4(1), pp. 1-6.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	http://jisasr.org/
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Download date	2026-10-30 02:44:27
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/3817

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Representing Sikhism: Essays in Memory of the Irish scholar Max Arthur Macauliffe

ABSTRACT: This is an introduction, by the guest editors, to the special issue of *JISASR* (Vol 4, 2017) entitled '*Representing Sikhism: Essays in Memory of the Irish Scholar Max Arthur Macauliffe*'. The genesis of this special issue lies in pioneering work on Macauliffe's Irish identity and personal and scholarly life undertaken by Professor Tadhg Foley (Galway). The active interest and support of members of the Sikh community in Ireland led to a conference, hosted by the Study of Religions Department at University College Cork, held to mark the centennial of Macauliffe's death on 15 March 1913. After some brief comments on past and present trends in the study of Ireland-Asia connections in the field of religions, we discuss Macauliffe's significance for modern representations of Sikhism and offer some contextual observations on each of the four papers. The article concludes with a brief resumé of the 2013 conference at which the papers were originally presented.

KEYWORDS: Macauliffe, Representing Sikhism, Ireland, conference, special issue.

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Brian BOCKING is Emeritus Professor of the Study of Religions at University College Cork and was previously at SOAS, University of London. He has published widely in fields including Japanese religions, Buddhism and Religious Education and has taught topics across the field of the study of religions, including Sikhism. In recent years he has been researching with Alicia Turner (Toronto) and Laurence Cox (Maynooth, Ireland), the forgotten 'Irish Buddhist' U Dhammaloka (ca.1856-1914) and, with Laurence Cox and YOSHINAGA Shin'ichi (Kyoto), the similarly forgotten Irish Japanologist and pioneer London Buddhist missionary Charles J W Pfoundes (1840-1907).

About this Volume

This special issue of *JISASR*, the *Journal of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions*, focuses largely on the life and times of Max Arthur Macauliffe (1838-1913), an Irishman who became a judge in colonial India and whose remarkable contribution to Sikh studies is epitomised in his multi-volume work¹ *The Religion of the Sikhs: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*, published in Oxford in 1909 and never out of print. Unusually for a western writer on Sikhism, Macauliffe's scholarly work is known and appreciated by Sikh and non-Sikh scholars alike, even a century after his death.

In this issue we find the most detailed account to date of Macauliffe's personal and scholarly life, an account which scotches a number of myths about him that have been reproduced somewhat uncritically by writers over the last hundred years. That we have new information about Macauliffe the man is due to the efforts of Prof. Tadhg Foley, who some years ago discovered in the course of unrelated research into the early history of Queen's University Galway (now NUI Galway) that Macauliffe was Irish and not, as widely believed, English, and that after graduating from Galway Macauliffe had attained worldwide fame as a scholar of Sikhism. This was an achievement which had never been noticed, let alone celebrated, in Macauliffe's native land. Professor Foley deserves our gratitude not only for realising the significance of his discoveries but also for taking active steps to bring Macauliffe the Irishman to the attention of both the Sikh community in Ireland and to scholars specialising in the field of the Study of Religions. From these auspicious connections emerged the 2013 Macauliffe centennial conference, on which more below, and now this special issue of *JISASR*.

Ireland and the Study of Religions

Macauliffe's remarkable contribution to modern Sikh Studies is only one example of the multifaceted yet mostly forgotten Irish involvement in the transformation of Asian religions in the 19th to early 20th centuries. Within the republic of Ireland, the population of around four million is approximately 90% Catholic. Most of the remainder are Protestant with, since the late twentieth century, a small but increasingly visible presence of Muslims, Sikhs, Eastern Orthodox and African-led Christians, Hindus, Pagans, Atheists, Buddhists, and many others. It goes without saying that the history, inculturation, internal diversity and complex interrelationships of each of these groups or movements as they contribute to a changing Irish culture and society deserve detailed study. Recent work on the diverse

¹ Usually referred to as a six-volume work, *The Religion of the Sikhs* was published from the outset as three books of two volumes each.

trajectories of Muslims in Ireland (Scharbrodt et al., ed. 2015), and of Ireland's lengthy relationship with Buddhism (Cox 2015) are two exemplary cases in point.

Academic writing within Ireland on religious topics was resolutely inward-looking for most of the twentieth century. The approach was essentially confessional, focusing on Catholic or Protestant concerns within the country, or at most within Europe and America, with little attention paid even to the largest religions elsewhere in the world, unless perhaps in relation to Christianity. It was not always so. Many ordinary Irish people were keenly interested in and knew far more about Asia in 1900 than in 2000, not least because many had family members (often soldiers) there and because the Irish universities prepared students across many disciplines, from languages to medicine, for careers in the Indian civil and military services.

Following Irish independence from the United Kingdom (in effect, after the establishment of the Free State in 1922) opportunities hitherto open to people of every class in Ireland to seek honourable employment overseas within the global British empire disappeared. Those who had served the British before independence became unmentionable; a social and political embarrassment for their relatives and descendants. Irish individuals who, like Macauliffe, had left their native Ireland and made a significant impact in distant lands were thus forgotten. Other Irish emigrants to Asia famous at the time for their religious activities and subsequently lost to memory include U Dhammaloka and Charles Pfoundes for Buddhism,² Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita) for Hinduism and Annie Besant, Charles Johnston, John Bowles Daly and Margaret and James Cousins for Indian/Sri Lankan Theosophy. Even the activities of Irish Christian missionaries in Asia have not received much critical scholarly attention, and it is only in very recent times that academic research has begun on some remarkable figures who remained in Ireland but fell outside the historical purview of the Irish Catholic-Protestant binary, such as the Baha'i writer George Townshend and the 19th century Dublin orientalist Mir Aulad Ali.

The annual conferences of ISASR, held in different parts of the whole island of Ireland since 2012, have provided a forum and an impetus to recover and share these lost Irish histories of religions as well as, of course, providing a forum for discussion of many other contemporary and historical topics in the study of religions beyond Ireland. We are accordingly grateful to the editors of *JISASR* for making this special issue possible; we cannot conceive of a more fitting venue for publication of the papers presented in this volume. We venture to hope that in turn the topics of Macauliffe and Sikhism may attract new readers to the journal and

² Cox (2013) identifies many other significant Irish connections with Buddhism including Methodist President Adam Clarke, archaeologists Thomas Watters and William Hoey and civil servants Maurice Collis and Daniel Twomey.

generate further awareness of Ireland's substantial and growing contribution to the academic study of religions.

Authors and Articles in this Special Issue

Macauliffe's enduring importance within the academic field of Sikh Studies derives from his close association with the Tat Khalsa reformists who, in the decades on either side of 1900, successfully created a systematically reformulated vision of Sikhism as a religion fully distinct from Hinduism. Since this vision was centred upon the teachings of the Gurus that are embodied in their hymns collected in the Sikh scriptures, Macauliffe's English translations quickly came to assume a fundamental role in propagating these reformist understandings to a wider audience. Initially addressed to ensuring the separate recognition of the Sikh community in British India, the definitions of the Tat Khalsa have continued to shape the dominant modern conceptions of what Sikhism is and what it ought to be.

Because he was a core member of the founding fathers of modern Sikhism, Macauliffe has consequently continued to enjoy an unquestioned status in Sikh circles today. As the only contributor to this volume who is not primarily identified as a Sikh Studies scholar, Tadhg Foley brings a challengingly fresh perspective to bear on some of the accepted facts about Macauliffe's life. In particular, Foley's close attention to Macauliffe's origins as an Irishman uses hitherto unexplored documentary evidence to show that he was born and educated as a Catholic in Limerick. This runs contrary to the accepted understanding that Macauliffe's explanation of Sikhism as a Protestant reformation of a corrupted Hinduism is to be accounted for by his own Protestant origins. This and other questionings of Macauliffe's own supposedly devout Sikh practices will certainly need to be embodied in modern scholarly understandings of who he actually was and what he represents.

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh is herself an established scholar in the field whose reputation derives in significant part from her notable translations from the Sikh scriptures. As such, she is well placed to give a sympathetic picture in her paper of the continuing significance of Macauliffe's great pioneering achievement as a translator of the compositions of the Sikh Gurus, while also exploring some of the tensions involved in his dual status as both a former British official and as a close associate of his Sikh collaborators. She also offers some perceptive observations of his translation strategy, in particular the limitations imposed by the assumptions of his age and background in his choice of theological expressions and bias towards non-inclusive gender terms.

The following paper, by Anne Murphy, addresses the tensions implicit in Macauliffe's dual status from the expanded perspective of contemporary scholarship on the complex ambiguities of identity and

historical understanding in colonial India. Drawing on the increasingly sophisticated work being done in Sikh Studies in Western universities today, she focuses particularly on Macauliffe's handling of the non-scriptural sources which he drew upon for the traditional histories of the Gurus. These provide the narrative articulating his scriptural selections in his volumes on *The Sikh Religion*. This analysis enables her to show both his keen awareness of parallels between British and Sikh historiography and his ultimate inability to reconcile the inherent tensions between them.

A wider context of a different kind is evoked in the final paper by Christopher Shackle. This moves to the post-Macauliffe era and looks at the work of Puran Singh (1881-1931). Born a Sikh, then converted to Buddhism while studying science in Japan, he later reconverted to Sikhism in India. A maverick figure throughout his remarkable life, he combined a scientific career with prolific literary activity in both Punjabi and English. Taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the imperial world, he published numerous books of spiritual poetry in English which conveyed a rapturous understanding of Sikh teachings in a universalist language. The same approach characterises his often very free English verse translations from the Sikh scriptures, which achieve a result aesthetically quite different from Macauliffe's renderings while arousing an awareness of the multiple possibilities of meaning inherent in these foundational sacred texts.

The Macauliffe Centennial Conference, 15 March 2013

The essays in this issue of *JISASR* have emerged from the conference entitled 'Representing Sikhism: a centennial conference in honour of the Irish scholar Max Arthur Macauliffe (11 September 1838 – 15 March 1913)'.³ The conference was a public academic event, held at University College Cork exactly one hundred years (to the day) from Macauliffe's death. Four distinguished speakers from Ireland, the USA, Canada and the United Kingdom presented papers, followed by a lively panel discussion with audience participation. The theme of 'Representing Sikhism' was designed to capture Macauliffe's pioneering contribution to Sikh Studies and global

³ The 2013 conference programme remains available at <https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/academic/studyofreligions/2013-03-08RepresentingSikhism15March2013programme.pdf>. There are brief videos in English (<https://youtu.be/74y4JXnikXw>) and Punjabi (<https://youtu.be/AFFeMhNqUy8>) by UCC filmmaker Stephen Bean. A follow-up conference, also supported by the Irish Sikh community, on 'Emerging Trends and Developments in Sikh & Punjabi Studies' was held on 22 March 2014. It highlighted the innovative work of postgraduate and early-career researchers in Sikh & Punjabi studies. The programme and abstracts can be found at <https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/academic/studyofreligions/documents/Programme-EMERGINGTRENDSANDDEVELOPMENTSINSIKHPUNJABISTUDIES2014-02-23.pdf> (accessed 2 February 2017).

awareness of Sikhism, while enabling speakers to address broader issues of socio-historical context, religious authority, translation and representation.

The speakers' expertise, as reflected in their papers in this volume, ranged from Irish Studies to Sikh, Punjabi and South Asian Studies, and the presentations covered history, biography, genealogy, translation studies, historiography and studies of literature. The conference also included the launch by Prof Anne Murphy of Paddy O'Leary's *Servants of the Empire: The Irish in Punjab 1881-1921*. The day culminated with a delicious Punjabi meal for all provided by the local Sikh community and a rousing dance performance from the Shamrock Bhangra Band (Dublin).

The conference attracted a substantial audience, including academic staff and students of UCC and other Irish universities, members of the Sikh communities in Cork, Dublin, Galway and other parts of Ireland and interested members of the public from Ireland and the UK. The Indian Ambassador to Ireland Mr Debashish Chakravarti and Mrs Adity Chakravarti attended this first-ever conference on Sikhism to be held in Ireland. The event was organised and supported by the members of the Study of Religions Department at UCC and funded through the UCC Development Foundation, largely through the generosity of members of the Irish Sikh community including the Board of Management of the Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar, Dublin. Special thanks are due to Dr and Mrs Jasbir Singh Puri for unwavering support and encouragement in so many ways throughout, including a generous donation of books to the UCC library, and to Mr Gunwant Singh, Mr Gurbir Singh, Mr Balinder Singh Bhatia, Mr G. S. Chadha and other helpers, participants and supporters too numerous to mention but not less appreciated, who made significant contributions of various kinds, including those who travelled in some cases long distances to participate in the event.

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February 2017

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