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Mrs Pounds and Mrs Pfoundes: A Futuristic Historical Essay in Honour of Professor Ursula King

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ABSTRACT

In this short essay written for Professor Ursula King's *Festschrift* I reflect on the general problem of researching and recovering events and individuals previously 'lost' to historians of religions, taking as my example recent collaborative research into forgotten early Irish Buddhists. I consider also the problems of researching other traditionally under-represented figures, including many women; for example, the wife (Rosa Alice Hill) and mother (Caroline Pounds) of the Irish Buddhist Charles Pfoundes. In the second and rather more speculative part of the essay I look at some ways in which increasingly sophisticated and increasingly accessible technological developments, allied with growing 'crowd' participation in the provision and analysis of historical data, might in future enable us to discover far more than we currently can about events and individuals in the past.

* * *

Introduction

In 1974 I was postgraduate student at the University of Leeds, studying for an MA in Religious Studies in a year-long programme which included a course on comparative mysticism taught by Ursula King. I was one of only two MA students, so classes were held in Ursula's study and involved much discussion. I wrote an essay on the American Trappist monk Thomas Merton, which Ursula subsequently encouraged me to publish. At that stage, the thought of making public anything I had written terrified me and I did nothing about it. Nevertheless, I kept the essay among my possessions, occasionally turning it up in a dusty file as I moved into new offices first at Stirling, then Bath, SOAS, and eventually Cork. The last time I came across the essay was two years ago, in July 2015, when I was clearing out my office at University College Cork prior to retirement. I finally accepted that the badly typed essay

which I had been carrying around with me for more than forty years would never be published, so I threw it into one of many black rubbish bags along with the other detritus of four decades and more in academe. Soon afterwards, I was asked if I had anything I could contribute to this Festschrift and I thought 'I could finally take up Ursula's suggestion and publish my essay on Thomas Merton …'

There are two lessons I take from this story. One is, never, ever, throw anything away, you never know when it might come in useful. The other is that Ursula King had more confidence in me than I had in myself as a young and very naïve student. That says a lot about Ursula, and I would like to thank her publicly for her encouragement. It helped.

While I have known Ursula for many years, we have met mainly at annual BASR, EASR and IAHR conferences and similar events, and I am as curious as anyone to gain from this festschrift from Ursula's colleagues and former students a fuller picture of Ursula's remarkable biography and her multifarious academic and related activities over the years. While she is an internationally respected figure whose wisdom, knowledge and expertise has been sought and appreciated worldwide, Ursula King has always been a stalwart of the BASR and she has contributed to the development of Religious Studies in the UK in countless ways. I feel that her most important contribution for someone of my generation and background has been her promotion of gender studies in religion worldwide, including her tireless work to promote gender-aware scholarship in the IAHR community and her many conference panels and publications, including her pioneering consultancy and authorship roles in the religions and gender sections of the influential 2005 Macmillan *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Jones, 2005; King, 2005). Ursula was herself a pioneer woman scholar in the study of religions in the UK. During the three years of my undergraduate studies at Lancaster, before I first encountered Ursula at Leeds, I took just one 'half-course' with a woman lecturer (Suzette Heald, from Anthropology). All of the lecturers in the Religious Studies department at Lancaster were men, and I can say at this distance that this seemed perfectly natural at the time. At Leeds, in 1974-5, my MA course was taught by two now-eminent scholars, Michael Pye and Ursula King, an arrangement which must have helped shape my idea of a sensible gender balance in the teaching of religions at university level, but I can't say that I thought consciously about the topic until years later.

My contribution to this *Festschrift* draws on two areas of interest (to me at least) that developed entirely during my last posting at UCC, Cork, between 2008-2015. Incidentally, there is a history to the development of the study of religions at Cork whose details I hardly know despite efforts to obtain the records; someone should do the research before the papers are thrown away...! I am aware that the academic programme called 'Religions and Global Diversity', which was approved in 2006 and enabled the University to start teaching about religions in 2007/8, was not the first attempt to introduce the study of religion(s) at UCC, a major Irish university which had maintained a proud record of not teaching religion as an academic topic since its inception in 1847. In 2004, an earlier proposal of, I understand, a far more

theological character had been turned down by the University, paving the way for the 'Religions and Global Diversity' programme to be accepted. Ursula King was an external assessor of the earlier 2004 proposal and her evaluation of that proposal was among the factors that led the University to its subsequent, and as it turned out successful, attempt to introduce a programme firmly located in the non-confessional academic study of religions (http://www.ucc.ie/en/religion//).

My two areas of interest addressed in this short essay are (a) digital humanities as applied to the study of religions, and (b) the study of late 19th/early 20th century Irish Buddhists. These two topics, the former perhaps commanding a wider audience than the latter, are for me intimately related, since the recovery of the stories of two remarkable but hitherto entirely forgotten Irish figures in the history of modern global Buddhism (U Dhammaloka (?1856-?1914) and Charles Pfoundes (1840-1907)[1] has been made possible only by the exponential proliferation, over the last decade or so, of digital resources and online search capabilities absolutely unthinkable to young academics of my own generation. My atrociously typed essay on Thomas Merton in 1974 was produced on an ancient manual office typewriter and it was typed, rather than handwritten, only as a concession to expectations of postgraduate level work. Younger academics today wonder how their predecessors managed to do academic work without the aid of computers and the internet. So do I. It's probably a good thing that my Thomas Merton essay has vanished; it was based on reading some books from Leeds University library and elsewhere and then thinking about what I had read. It might have come across as a bit dated.

In this essay I intend to be unswervingly optimistic rather than passionately objective about the future of the academic study of religions, and particularly within that the historical study of traditionally under-represented, forgotten and marginalised groups, including women. While contemporary scholars are broadly gender-aware, this awareness cannot be back-projected into history. Most scholarly texts and opinions of the late nineteenth and indeed much of the twentieth century are undeniably sexist, as well as racist, classist and otherwise reprehensible in many different ways. My optimism about future studies is based on my experience of collaboratively researching and writing about Dhammaloka and Pfoundes over the last eight years. Both of these figures were men, but both had been, despite their remarkable lives, completely forgotten in the modern history of religions and they were to this extent marginalised and obscured in scholarly discourse in much the same way as many remarkable women and other under-represented people. My experience has been that it would simply not have been possible to recover the biographies of these two forgotten figures, and to develop a reliable and comprehensive account of their complex activities and connections, with all the fresh knowledge and insights that this research generated, without the assistance of the new digital tools and technologies which have become widely available to academics (and to the public at large) over the last few

[1] See *The Dhammaloka Project* (which includes Pfoundes) hosted by Laurence Cox at https://dhammalokaproject.wordpress.com/

years. I would add that in both cases I have benefited immeasurably from working in close collaboration with fellow-scholars, rather than ploughing an individual furrow.[2]

Dhammaloka had some female acquaintances and supporters from time to time, but as a celibate Buddhist monk (from 1900-1914) he spent most of his time in an all-male environment and since he worked very hard to conceal his past we cannot be sure of anything about him prior to 1900, including his family background. Pfoundes on the other hand was a lay Buddhist who was connected with and influenced by women at various junctures throughout his life, so that our research, while focused on Pfoundes himself, has turned up a good deal of information about women connected with Pfoundes, in particular his mother Caroline Pounds and his wife Rosa Alice Pfoundes; the Mrs Pounds and Mrs Pfoundes of my title. I will focus my discussion on these two women, connected with Pfoundes respectively by blood and marriage.[3]

Mrs Pounds

Caroline Pounds, (née Elam) married James Baker Pounds, apothecary, in Ireland in 1836 when she was twenty. Her first child, Joseph Elam Pounds (known as Elam) was born in 1838, followed two years later by Charles James William Pounds, who in adult life changed his surname to Pfoundes. Another brother, George St Ledger Pounds, died at six months in the Autumn of 1843. Some time in the 1840s, Caroline separated from her husband James and left home, leaving the two surviving boys in their father's care.[4] Caroline subsequently remained in Ireland, supporting herself as a governess and then as a companion and housekeeper. She died in 1898 at the age of eighty-two. By contrast first Charles (in 1854), then Elam (in 1855) and finally their father James (around 1856) emigrated to Australia. Charles' father James and elder brother Elam made new lives for themselves in Australia, but almost immediately upon landing at Melbourne in 1854 Charles had run away to sea.

Around 1863, newly arrived in Japan, Charles changed his surname to Pfoundes, learned Japanese and developed a passion for studying Japanese customs and culture. He subsequently made a career for himself as an East-West middleman, based mainly in Japan but with a thirteen-year period (1879-1892) in London where he gave innumerable talks on Japan and other topics and in 1889 founded the 'Buddhist Propagation Society'; the first-ever Buddhist mission to the West (Bocking et al. 2014). As far as we know Charles never met, nor indeed wanted to contact, his brother Elam or his father James after he left them in Ireland in 1854. He did however spend

[2] In the case of Dhammaloka, with Alicia Turner (York University, Toronto) and Laurence Cox (Maynooth University, Ireland) and in the case of Pfoundes, with Laurence Cox and YOSHINAGA Shin'ichi (University of Kyoto, Japan).

[3] For more on women who influenced Pfoundes see my chapter 'Charles Pfoundes and the first Buddhist mission to the West, 1889-1892: some research questions.' In Bornet (2018).

[4] Two newspaper court accounts differ; one says the marriage ended in 1840, the other (partly unreadable) says 18?9. 1839 was before George St Ledger was born, so probably 1849 is meant, but both may be inaccurate.

time, though hardly quality time, with his mother on several occasions. In 1874 Caroline travelled to Tokyo, where Pfoundes held a responsible position in a major shipping company. That visit ended, according to Caroline's later testimony in a Dublin courtroom in 1877, with Charles forcibly taking from her all the money she had brought with her to Japan, so that she was obliged to rely on the assistance of friends to get home. Caroline was in court because Charles, who in 1877 was travelling the world prior to settling, as he planned, in London, had visited Caroline in her own home in Dublin in May 1877 when she was in her early 60s and physically assaulted her when she did not give him back some Japanese ornaments he wanted. In October he returned and threatened to attack her again if she did not give him some papers. Pfoundes only avoided jail by paying sureties to keep the peace towards his mother for 12 months ('A Strange Case' 1877; 'Extraordinary case' 1877).

With these facts in mind, it is remarkable to note that Caroline Pounds is usually regarded as one of the pioneer female artists of Australia, her reputation based entirely on a long-lost cache of botanical, bird and other paintings found in an attic in Geelong, Victoria as recently as the 1980s, some showing oriental influences. Until very recently it was thought that around 1846 (based on an inscription on one of the paintings) Caroline had accompanied her husband to Australia, where by the 1860s he had become a quite well-known coroner, and that the long-married couple had at some point visited their son Charles, an orientalist, in Japan -- this connection accounting for the 'oriental' elements in Caroline's pictures. It is only with the help of recently-available digital databases offering searchable versions of books, newspapers, shipping records, gazetteers, archival materials, family trees and all manner of otherwise un-findable (because we don't know where to look) published and unpublished data, that we have been able to build up a more reliable picture of Caroline's life and, for example, to observe that if the lost pictures were indeed produced in 1846, the oriental influences could have little to do with Charles' career in Japan, for he was only six years old at the time. Moreover, there is no evidence, beyond an inscription on one painting, to suggest that Caroline ever was in Australia, and in court in Ireland in 1877 she categorically denied that she had accompanied her husband there. Whether she should be regarded as a pioneering *Australian* woman artist is, therefore, a moot point![5]

There is much more about Caroline Pounds that is intriguing and elusive. Her own father, Joseph Elam (1782-1829) was a military officer, the errant son of a Quaker merchant of Leeds. Elam was by all accounts a negligent father of the three children (Caroline and two brothers) he had with his first wife, Anne Elam. Of Anne, virtually nothing is known – she may be the Anne Elam who died in a London workhouse in 1833, quite possibly still legally married to

[5] The current (July 29 2017) Wikipedia entry on Caroline Pounds provides an up-to-date overview of what is known, including my own research with Laurence Cox and YOSHINAGA Shin'ichi https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caroline_Pounds . A comparison with the much earlier (1992) *Design and Art Australia Online* entry on Caroline Pounds, which remains on the web at https://www.daao.org.au/bio/caroline-pounds/biography/, illustrates just how much more, and more accurate, information has emerged as a result of digital search capabilities developed since 1992.

Joseph Elam. Her erstwhile husband was, in the late 1820s, involved in some way in a scandalous intrigue involving the two mistresses (mother and daughter Eliza Elam and Phoebe Blakeney) of a wealthy London-based Irish rake, Lord Portarlington. In 1827 Joseph Elam contracted what seems to have been a marriage of convenience with Lord Portarlingon's senior mistress, Eliza (formerly Blakeney). Two years later, in 1829, Joseph died, and in 1833 Eliza herself passed away while on a visit to Manchester with Lord Portarlington. Portalington himself died in 1845, and in a sensational London fraud trial, which gripped the press and public at home and overseas during late 1853 and 1854, it was alleged that, while Eliza Elam had produced a child and claimed her as Lord Portarlington's heir, the child was neither Joseph Elam's nor Lord Portarlington's; Eliza, it was argued, was beyond childbearing age and had bought the child from a peasant woman before convincing Lord Portarlington that the girl was his and thus deserved a £5,000 inheritance. It was the dispute over this inheritance that brought the matter into the open.[6]

Caroline Pounds, whose mother was Elam Pounds' estranged wife, Anne Elam, grew up in this evidently rather volatile social milieu; she was eleven years old when her father died. It is possible that she benefited from the kind of education provided for Lord Portarlington's own privileged children and this is where she learned to draw and paint with such style, and perhaps why she had the kind of friends who could rescue her from faraway Japan in 1874, but so far it has proved impossible to fill in many more details of her life. Caroline Pounds remains an enigmatic figure, evidently well-educated, strong-willed and able for much of her life to live independently in Dublin, where in 1877 she still maintained a house and a maidservant, had sufficient resources to make a trip to distant Japan to see her estranged son, and was prepared to take him to court when he misbehaved.

Mrs Pfoundes

Rosa Alice Pfoundes (née Hill, 1856-1936) was one of the daughters of the governor of Sandwich gaol on the South coast of England. In 1878, at the age of 22, Rosa was staying in Liverpool with her recently-married sister Kate when Charles Pfoundes arrived in England to stay. Pfoundes was 38, seemingly with a good deal of money behind him and an ambition to establish himself in London society. The couple were married by the Liverpool Registrar in March 1878 and had set up house in London by the following year. Pfoundes was a regular attendee and sometimes speaker at various literary, geographical and orientalist gatherings around London and in the early 1880s the presence of Mrs Pfoundes is sometimes noted in the audience. As time went on, Charles Pfoundes, who had been able to secure only a humble clerking job at the Admiralty despite his expensive maritime experience in the Far East, enjoyed dwindling acceptance and support from the higher echelons of London society. The couple remained childless and towards the end of the 1880s a Japanese Buddhist who had come to the U.K. to study with Max Müller at Oxford reported back to his Buddhist colleagues in Japan that

[6] The above brief summary of the case is based on multiple newspaper reports of the time from 1953-4.

Pfoundes, who lived in very modest circumstances in London, albeit surrounded by thousands of books and papers, was interested in returning to Japan and that perhaps a position as an English-language teacher could be found for his wife Rosa. It is evident however that the marriage failed; in 1892 Pfoundes sailed for Japan alone (Bocking et al. 2014) and we have found no evidence of contact between Pfoundes and his wife, nor indeed mention of her, from the time of Pfoundes' arrival in Japan in early 1893 until his death in Kobe in 1907. Back in England Rosa Pfoundes remained in London, working as a civil servant (and eventually thereby qualified to vote), living either alone or sharing accommodation with other single or married women. In 1921, presumably still working at the age of 57, she is listed in the electoral roll at an apartment in the pleasant environment of Bessborough Gardens, Pimlico. However, in November 1936, at the age of 80, she died in a hospital for the poor in Sussex and was shortly afterwards buried in a pauper's (unmarked) grave in Hove cemetery. Even in comparison with the mother-in-law she probably never met, the independent and cultured Caroline Pounds, there is a paucity of evidence about the life, character and opinions of Rosa Alice Pfoundes which renders her (so far) virtually invisible to history.

Back in the Future

In the futuristic part of this essay, I want to suggest some ways in which emerging technologies – and, perhaps more importantly, their accessibility and their manner of use – might in future help us to learn and thereby understand far more than we can currently know about 'lost' figures in history such as Caroline Pounds and Rosa Pfoundes. Their lives – like the lives of many women in history and unlike the lives of many men – cannot readily be accessed through published texts and records of public events because they did not live public lives in the way that Caroline's son, Rosa's husband, did throughout his life. There were of course prominent and powerful women who were recognised as leaders in the field of religion in late 19th century London. In the late 1880s, Pfoundes vigorously denounced the 'Buddhist' pretensions of the Theosophical Society (to which he had once belonged), and in doing so attracted the ire of its leading figures who included Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant. However, powerful and well-documented female figures in the public sphere are the exception rather than the rule in this period.

We cannot see the future and, in reality, gazing into the future is entirely an act of imagination, heavily conditioned by what we think is possible. At most, I can hope only to identify some trends and developments which appear to hold great promise for those of us engaged in the study of 'hidden' histories. I am well aware that on a different reading, and applied to our contemporary society, these technological developments and social trends might augur only a thoroughly dystopian future; a world in which everyone is watching and everyone is being watched, and where life becomes a life sentence in a technological prison, or prism. However, I am interested here only in the ethical application of these technologies and methods to the past; in recovering lost histories of forgotten people and improving the completeness and veracity of our accounts of what has been, not least in the field of religions.

Technologies

In our three-person collaborative work on Irish Buddhists we have used various items of software, particularly Zotero, Google Groups, Dropbox and Skype which have helped us to work together. The ability of a group of people to work together in real time without having to be physically co-located was the stuff of science fiction not long ago. On many, many occasions, I have been saved by my online collaborators (and perhaps vice-versa) from errors of fact or interpretation. Academics present conference papers hoping for friendly and constructive feedback and advice from their peers; collaborative work puts us in that helpful situation all the time.

Supplementing these collaborative tools is a vast and ever-expanding range of information resources; databases, websites and archives. Some are freely available, some have a paywall, others are only available via an institutional subscription. Some are well-funded and highly professional in their design, while others are home-made, but nevertheless may provide information unavailable elsewhere. Out-of-copyright books are being programmatically scanned and made available. Online newspaper archives add millions of new pages every year, so that fruitless searches conducted last month may produce results this month.

Crucially, some archives enable and encourage users to improve the frequently inaccurate OCR (optical character recognition) transcriptions that so often frustrate researchers. When OCR is corrected, searches that didn't work last time now bring results. The Australian National Library's Trove site (http://trove.nla.gov.au/) trusts its users and actively encourages them to improve the site. As I write this, Trove is reporting that in one day (as is typical) there have been 10,673 text corrections, in one week 21,879 items tagged to make them easier to find, and in one month 3,699 comments added. The British Newspaper Archive similarly benefits from crowd input (http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk). Other archives seem determined to keep users out, thus losing the benefit of this valuable and vast voluntary input. Their errors lie uncorrected. Sites with a restrictive policy will eventually become the least useful.

It is relatively easy to imagine a future in which three existing trends become the norm. Firstly, information sources – at least historical information sources – will become freely available online to all. Secondly, all sites will actively encourage users to correct and improve their content in order to grow better. Thirdly, technological advances will make it far, far easier than today to upload – to the web, the net, the cloud, the Chardin, or whatever our nebulous shared cyberspace may be called in the future – items including shopping lists, laundry bills, doctors' notes, letters, court reports, police files, school registers, obscure periodicals, account books, old photos, bus tickets, political broadsheets, religious tracts and so on, identified or not, from one's own collection or from obscure archives.

Most of us can already point a phone at a document and send the image by email or text. In the future, it will be very easy to upload almost any item to an appropriate website, attaching whatever textual clues ('metadata'), if any, we may have to hand and inviting 'the crowd' to contribute. Crowdfinding, rather than crowdfunding. A recent example of the power of this approach, still sufficiently novel to be featured in the national news, is the website 'Grandpa's photos' (www.grandpas-photos.com/) created in 2014 by Australian David Tomkins, who found among his grandfather's possessions a box of unidentified travel photographs from at least seven different countries, taken in the 1960s. Tomkins posted them on a website, asking other internet users if they could suggest where his grandfather had travelled. After three years there remained only one picture still unidentified. The power of this approach to research something that would otherwise (and in the past usually did) remain stubbornly unknown, came from Tomkins' willingness to invite an anonymous global audience to offer their suggestions and insights.

We can augment the power of 'the crowd' by using advanced and currently expensive, but in the future readily accessible, tools already used by the security services which have been explicitly designed to make the unknown (whodunnit?) known (s/hedunnit), and increasingly by marketing organisations to identify potential customers (Cheshire 2017). As I write, the idea of using facial recognition software to charge train travellers (rather than using tickets) is being floated as an intelligent use of the technology. Looking on the good side, this technology, in the hands of any one of us interested in the history of religions, could open up an entirely new and productive sphere of research, in which faces in historical photographs relating to religious events are scanned, uploaded by and for 'the crowd' in the same way as grandpa's photos, and in the background analysed and compared using artificial intelligence (AI) protocols to identify features, similarities and correspondences. The more photos available to be analysed and commented on by users, the more useful the database becomes, (and vice-versa) so that we could very soon be able to upload a group photo taken somewhere entirely unknown, circa 1880-1910, and get a list of putative names, dates and locations.

Speaking of locations, almost every photograph has a background, often ignored when we focus on the 'subject', and the existing ability of specialists to identify at a glance the particular studio, or venue, or era, in which a photo was taken, using visual clues such as the precise type of furniture, wallpaper, clothing, crockery, jewellery, hairstyle and so on appearing in a picture, could similarly be harnessed through AI and the contributions of 'the crowd'. Twinned with facial recognition software, a crowd-friendly 'background-analysis' programme for images could extend the capability of the historian and make it possible to establish identifications, connections and contexts currently way beyond our reach.

Texts, also, are more than their words and meanings. Documents are written in a certain hand, taught in this school or that, or found in this family or that, on a shape or texture of paper found only here, or only there, in bindings characteristic of a particular place, era or institution. Typed documents can reveal the typewriter. A human specialist in graphic analysis may be able to

identify the provenance of a particular document, but is such a specialist always available? Almost any line of research these days can quickly take us beyond our comfort zone, and digital resources offer the possibility of taking technology-based specialists with us on the journey.

In 1974, I found out all that an average MA student could be expected to know about Thomas Merton from the relatively few books I could get hold of through my privileged access to the university library at Leeds. Ursula King taught me that history had to be rewritten, notably through the clarifying lens of gender awareness. Studying marginalised and forgotten 19th century figures over the past decade has shown me that history can certainly be rewritten when we harness the power of the new collaborative research technologies. In future, the sources of information available to us, the specialist tools of analysis we can use and the power of 'crowdfinding' open to us through the development and opening-up of digital technologies will all increase, and they will increasingly be free, because then they will work better.

And that surely has to be a good thing.

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