Knights Across the Atlantic

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On 9 December 1869, the members of the Garment Cutters’ Association of Philadelphia met to dissolve their organisation and divide its funds amongst themselves. After that meeting ended, some of them convened elsewhere to create a new, secret association. Nine men, joined by five more two days later, founded the first assembly or branch of the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, although they only adopted that name on 28 December. The leading spirit behind that new order, Uriah Stephens, a man trained for the Baptist ministry before economic circumstances forced him to seek work in the garment trades, designed the Knights of Labor along the lines of a fraternal order with an elaborate ritual based on Freemasonry. The Knights kept their name and existence hidden from the public, even from the workers they sounded out as members. They announced their meetings in a cryptic code scrawled on the walls of public buildings. From these unlikely beginnings the Knights of Labor became one of the great social movements of nineteenth-century American history.

The Knights grew slowly during the 1870s. That decade was marked by the Panic of 1873, a global financial crisis that left economic depression in its wake, and by the Great Uprising of 1877, when the first nationwide railroad strike in American history took place and in some cities and acquired the feel of an armed struggle between workers, employers, local police and state militias. The Knights were only marginally involved in these battles and in 1878, at their first General Assembly, or national convention, they mustered around 10,000 members. As the trade unions succumbed to depressed economic conditions or to the counter-attacks of employers after the Great Uprising, the Knights moved slowly, at first, into the spaces they left behind.

They exploded onto the American social and political scene in the 1880s. From 50,000 members in 1883, 70,000 in 1884 and 100,000 in 1885, the Knights of Labor approached the staggering figure of 1 million members in the early months of 1886. In that year, known to historians as the Great Upheaval, American workers struck in unprecedented numbers, formed numerous labour parties that contested and often won elections, and flocked to labour organisations, whether the Knights or the trade unions, in their hundreds of thousands. The economic and political rulers of the United States found themselves facing a mass mobilisation from below that threatened to redraw the American social landscape on cooperative rather than competitive lines. The Knights of Labor became the symbol of and the banner for that mass mobilisation. Yet only ten years later the Knights were effectively dead. Employers and their allies in government launched a fierce attack against the Order and rooted it out of workplaces across America. Rival trade unions fought the Knights out of their industries and took many of their members. Knights fought amongst themselves for control of the Order’s leadership and over its tactics, strategy and political orientation. The Knights of Labor disappeared from American life almost as quickly as they had entered it, and in 1917 their last General Master Workman, the top executive position in the Order, deposited its records in a shed behind an office in Washington DC, and formally brought the Order to an end.

The rise and fall of the Knights of Labor remains one of the most dramatic episodes in American and Canadian labour history. But the Order became more than just a North American movement. Over the course of their history the Knights established assemblies in Belgium, England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, France, Italy, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. There are suggestions that the Knights also extended into Germany, Mexico, Scandinavia and even India. This book tells a part of this international story. It explores the history of the Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland, which began in 1883 with an assembly in Wales and ended in 1894 with the collapse of the last surviving English assemblies.

The British and Irish Knights never became anything like as powerful as the Knights in the United States. Their assemblies never organised more than ten or fifteen thousand workers, only a fraction of the million that belonged to American assemblies in the summer of 1886. Yet British and Irish Knights won the allegiance, at various times, of influential figures in British and Irish political life. The Knights of Labor became part of the great changes that took place in the British labour movement in the late 1880s and early 1890s, from the extension of the trade unions beyond their traditional home in the skilled trades to the early development of working-class politics.
independent of the Liberals and Conservatives – a process that, within little
more than a decade, culminated in the birth of the British Labour Party. The
Knights were more than a footnote in British and Irish labour history: they
were an important, if brief and under-recognised, part of it.

The history of their order has undergone sweeping changes and revisions
over the course of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
American labour historians began to write the history of the Knights of
Labor even as Terence Powderly remained the General Master Workman
between 1879 and 1893. Powderly, George MacNeill, another Knight, the
German-American socialist Friedrich Sorge and economist and Christian
Socialist Professor Richard T. Ely all placed the Knights of Labor at the
heart of American labour history.3 As labour history became an academic
discipline during the early twentieth century, however, its early practitioners
saw the Knights as a failed alternative to the American Federation of Labor
(AFL), which fought with and defeated the Order in the 1880s and 1890s.
John Commons, Selig Perlman, Robert Hoxie and, slightly later, Gerald
Grob – the so-called Commons or Wisconsin School of labour history – all
argued that the Knights represented a failed, utopian strain in American
labour that the AFL, with its exclusive focus on economic objectives,
especially wages and working hours, was bound to overcome.4 Norman
Ware, by contrast, described its history as a ‘study in democracy’ and claimed
that the Order’s demise was not inevitable at all, but he remained in a
distinct minority during the first half of the twentieth century.5

From the 1960s onwards, however, labour historians rediscovered Ware’s
arguments and began to dismantle the binaries constructed by the Commons
School. They increasingly saw the Knights not as a backward-looking
reaction against the emergence of monopoly capitalism in the United States
– as Commons, Perlman and Grob had – but as a valid, serious and forward-
looking response to it. They emphasised the Order’s pioneering role in

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5 Ware, *Labor Movement*. 
the organisation of female and non-white workers. They rejected even the idea that the AFL was bound to thrive and the Order bound to fail. Leon Fink’s work on the many significant political ventures that the Knights pursued in the 1880s, Susan Levine’s pioneering study of the Order and gender questions, Robert Weir’s re-examination of its cultural practices and productions as well as its internal conflicts, are only a small selection of the scholarship that has enlarged and revised our understanding of the Knights of Labor in the past several decades.6

This book falls within that revision of American labour history and its emphasis on the importance, and the pioneering role, of the Knights of Labor. It also falls within the wider revision of labour history, as with other historical subjects, along transnational lines. Labour history has always dealt with international issues, at least since Marx issued his famous injunction for the workers of the world to unite, and earlier generations of historians by no means neglected the development of the labour movement, of socialist and anarchist currents, on an international scale. The great international movements of nineteenth-century labour, from the International Workingmen’s Association or First International of Marx and Bakunin to the Second International that united the powerful socialist parties of Europe before the First World War, have long been the subject of scholarly interest.7


Most labour historians, however, have concentrated on the story of their respective labour movements at a national level. This made sense. Trade unions, political parties and other working-class movements developed towards the end of the nineteenth century as national movements and engaged with national governments and, increasingly, national corporations. But as historians have argued more consistently in recent decades, viewing labour history through a national lens has obscured or downplayed some of the great processes, trends and movements that arose from and shaped nineteenth-century capitalism on a global scale. Much recent labour scholarship has stressed the importance of transnational processes like migration, the globalisation of capital, the extension of strikes and working-class solidarity across national borders, and myriad other trends that were not self-contained in any one country. Labour historians have also re-examined the famous movements of international labour, the relationships that developed between national movements, and have explored formal and informal associations between the workers of different countries that never or only barely appeared in earlier scholarship. Their research has already begun to reshape our understanding of American labour history.

But the transnational turn has barely touched the Knights of Labor. Aside from Canada, whose labour history is so closely bound up with that of the United States, and where Bryan Palmer and Gregory Kealey have provided such an excellent account of the Order's history, and New Zealand, where Robert Weir has unearthed the crucial role that Knights played in that country's early social and political history, the Order's history outside the United States remains largely unwritten. Maurice Dommanget explored...
the activities of Knights in France at book length some time ago. Leon Watillon’s pamphlet from the 1920s remains our only source concerning the Belgian assemblies. Several research articles deal in passing with Knights in Australia. Paragraphs in several works provide a brief introduction to the Order in South Africa. Knights in Italy and the other continental European countries appear largely in footnotes or stray sentences without much in the way of explanation. Assembling a comprehensive international history of the Knights of Labor out of these fragments is a task that historians have not yet attempted.10 This book is a part of that unfinished project.

The history of the British and Irish Knights also remains to be written. Henry Pelling provided the only short account of that history in 1956, and Ronald Bean and James D. Young fleshed out the Order’s history in Liverpool and Scotland, respectively, two decades later.11 Most subsequent historical writing that mentions the British and Irish Knights leans heavily on their work.12 Taken together, these scholars provide the foundations

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for an in-depth study of the Order’s British and Irish assemblies – but foundations are not a building, and this work provides the first comprehensive study of the Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland. It draws on the insights of recent scholarship concerning the Knights in the United States, and concerning the transnational aspects of labour history. It is indebted to Robert Weir’s pioneering work on the Knights in New Zealand, and to the impressive, if sometimes incomplete, database of the Order’s thousands of assemblies that Jonathan Garlock compiled in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{13}

The British and Irish Knights did their historians few favours. ‘The story of the Knights of Labor outside North America,’ as Robert Weir writes, ‘is one constructed from slender threads framing suggestive holes.’\textsuperscript{14} In Britain and Ireland these threads are quite slender indeed. Any internal documents they made have not survived, and the secrecy that they practised has further obscured their history. This book attempts to close as many of these suggestive holes as possible through extensive archival research across the United States and the United Kingdom. It relies especially on local newspapers around Britain, documentation from the Order’s rivals in the British labour movement, the records of American Knights, the personal papers of Terence Powderly and John Hayes, the Order’s Secretary-Treasurer and then General Master Workman after Powderly, the proceedings of the Order’s annual General Assemblies and its official organ, the \textit{Journal of United Labor}, renamed \textit{Journal of the Knights of Labor} in 1890. Together these sources are sufficiently dense and numerous to construct a detailed narrative of the Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland. First, however, we must place that narrative within its international context and within the global history of the Knights themselves.

\textbf{The World of the Knights of Labor}

The Knights of Labor made the transition from an American order to an international movement in an unprecedentedly globalised and interconnected world. Innovations from the steamship to the telegraph brought much of the earth closer together. Capital and trade extended throughout the world, aided by the growth of worldwide empires centred in Europe, North America and, increasingly, Japan, that subjugated or dominated great swathes of Africa, South America, Asia and the Pacific. The nineteenth

\textsuperscript{13} J. Garlock, \textit{Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor} (Westport: Greenwood, 1982).

\textsuperscript{14} Weir, \textit{Knights Down Under}, p. 220.
century was an age of nationalism but, paradoxically, it was an age of internationalism as well. The great international exhibitions brought together the world’s wares and attracted visitors from all over the planet. Lawyers and diplomats negotiated international treaties to govern the railroads, shipping and telegraph lines that did not remain conveniently within national frontiers. Scientists and middle-class professionals created international associations to exchange findings and methods in their respective fields. Social causes became international movements as well. Progressive reformers, as Daniel Rodgers explains, developed international networks to promote everything from the state regulation of public hygiene to cleaning up corrupt municipal governments.\(^{15}\) The years from 1870 to 1890, Karen Offen writes, were an era of ‘internationalizing feminism,’ when bodies such as the International Council of Women and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union brought women’s rights activists together from across the globe.\(^{16}\)

To the American economist, Richard T. Ely, the second half of the nineteenth century was an age of “economic internationalism” as well, and Ely was impressed most of all with the rise of labour as an international movement.\(^{17}\) The birth of the Knights of Labor in 1869 coincided with the heyday of the First International, formed in 1864. The International fell apart after the repression that followed the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871, after factional splits between the socialists and anarchists, and after the departure of many trade unionists. But working-class internationalism survived the fall of the International. Numerous international congresses of socialists, anarchists and trade unionists took place in the 1870s and 1880s even if they ended to little result.\(^{18}\) Great international fraternal orders, of which the Oddfellows and Order of Foresters were only among the largest, provided social insurance and a social life for their mainly working-class members.\(^{19}\) Advocates of cooperative enterprises from across the world met

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\(^{17}\) R.T. Ely, ‘Economic Internationalism,’ *The Chautauquan* (February 1890).


\(^{19}\) J. Baernreither, *English Associations of Working Men* (London: S. Sonnenschein, 1893);
at the annual British Co-operative Congresses to share their plans and experiences.20

Trade unionists across Europe and North America continued to support strikes, prevent the movement of strike-breakers and maintain correspondence with their colleagues in other countries. Individual unions such as the British Amalgamated Society of Engineers established branches across and even beyond the British Empire.21 After a congress at Paris in 1889, a new, Second International finally emerged to fill the gaping hole left by the decline of the First. Between then and the outbreak of the First World War, this new International symbolised the arrival of labour as a powerful social and political force in national and world affairs.22 International associations of trade unions developed alongside the Second International, some bringing together individual unions of the same trade, others bringing together the national federations of trade unions that emerged across Europe and North America from the 1860s onwards.23 The Knights of Labor, in other words, were but one of many movements that united workers of different countries in the nineteenth century.

For a time that order became the largest labour organisation in the world, simply on account of its million American members. During the 1880s and 1890s the Knights became one of the most extensive international working-class movements in the world as well – matched, as Weir writes, only by internationalism and the followers of Henry George’s single tax.24 Their international history began in the period between the two nineteenth-century Internationals and overlapped with the early history of the Second, and I have elsewhere described the Knights as a “First and a half International,” bridging the period between those two famous bodies and, as we will see in the following chapters, sharing some features with both of them.25


following account of the Order’s global history builds on Weir’s final chapter, closes some of the gaps that remain in it and places the British and Irish Knights within the context of the great international movement of which they became a part.

The first recorded assembly of the Knights of Labor outside of North America began in 1883, when travelling organiser John Hughes established Local Assembly (LA) 2886 in Cardiff. In the following year, as we will see at length in Chapter 1, the American glass workers of LA300 went abroad to organise their fellow craftsmen in Europe, and created a Universal Federation of Window-Glass Workers, which united glass workers from across Europe and North America. Their first success in organising assemblies of Knights came in Belgium. There, the Order’s representatives recruited the entirety of the Union Verrière, an association of glass workers in Charleroi that had already made contact with LA300 several years earlier.26 Albert Delwarte, the leader of that union and a veteran of Belgian branches of the First International, also led the Belgian assemblies. With help from Isaac Cline, Andrew Burtt and A.G. Denny, organisers working on behalf of both LA300 and the Order’s General Executive Board, the Belgian Knights quickly spread amongst other workers in Charleroi, including 3,000 coal miners by 1885 and many iron and steel workers.27 Organisers also reached Brussels, where the Knights established assemblies of workers making gloves, leather, lace, carpentry, confectionary, fur and tin.28 In 1887 the Belgian Knights brought their various assemblies under one central body, the State Assembly of Belgium. Albert Delwarte headed this body and represented it at the General Assembly in 1888, where Terence Powderly personally gave him gifts on behalf of the Order and where the assembled delegates paid him lengthy tribute.29

Robert Weir writes that ‘the Belgian KOL was probably defunct by the time New Zealand Knights began to enjoy success’ in 1890. That was certainly not the case. The Belgian State Assembly formally disaffiliated itself from the American Order at the end of the 1880s, not because it faced terminal decline itself but because its leaders wanted to distance the State Assembly from the severe problems then fracturing the American assemblies. Belgian Knights retained the allegiance of glass workers, miners, metalworkers and

28 Watillon, *Knights in Belgium*, p. 34.
glove makers around Brussels and Charleroi into the 1890s, and one report claimed in 1891 that the Order organised 23,000 out of 30,000 coal miners in the latter city.\textsuperscript{30} Their leader, Jean Callewaert, had lectured delegates to the first International Congress of Miners on the Order’s principles the previous year.\textsuperscript{31} Belgian Knights left a lasting imprint on their labour movement. Leon Watillon credits them with introducing mutual insurance schemes for sick and death pay into Belgian trade union practice, and from 1892 payment into such a fund was finally made compulsory for all Belgian Knights.\textsuperscript{32} Robert Weir claims that the Knights ‘helped nascent unions articulate goals, taught them how to mobilize, and educated them on a set of principles that aided in craft solidarity.’\textsuperscript{33} The coal miners left the Order in 1895, but Belgian glass workers continued to use the Knights’ name and practices into the 1930s, well after the American body had faded into complete insignificance and unimportance.\textsuperscript{34}

The Order briefly found a foothold in Italy. Glass workers there certainly attended meetings of the Universal Federation. Some reports claimed that as many as 1,000 Italian glass workers became Knights in the mid-1880s.\textsuperscript{35} Further reports in 1886 mention ‘an organization of Italian operatives resembling the American “Knights of Labour,”’ arrested \textit{en masse} by local authorities, but provided no further details.\textsuperscript{36} The only tangible evidence for Italian assemblies comes from Jules Corcodal, who had spent several years in the United States and decided on his return to Turin to open assemblies of the Knights of Labor there. Corcodal corresponded with the \textit{Journal of United Labor} in 1888, and revealed that in the middle of that year he organised three local assemblies, one with 125 members, with the other two boasting more than 150 members each. A lack of money prevented further growth, and Corcodal and his colleagues seem to have given up soon afterwards.\textsuperscript{37} But his calls for Knights to attend and present an exhibition at the Paris Exposition of 1889 left a more lasting impression on the Order’s global history.\textsuperscript{38} A number of local and district assemblies did indeed send over their flags, banners and other insignia. These were displayed alongside

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Revue Socialiste}, 66 (June 1890).
\textsuperscript{32} Watillon, \textit{Knights in Belgium}, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{33} Weir, \textit{Knights Down Under}, p. 217.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Maysville Daily Evening Bulletin}, 16 July 1886.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{The Times}, 29 June 1886.
\textsuperscript{37} Jules Corcodal to Powderly, 17 June 1892, Box 72, \textit{Terence Powderly Papers}, Catholic University of America History Research Center and University Archives (TVP).
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Journal of United Labor} (\textit{JUL}), 1 and 22 November 1888.
bound copies of the *Journal of United Labor* and the proceedings of the general assemblies, as well as pictures of Powderly, Uriah Stephens and other of the Order’s leading figures.\(^3^9\)

The Knights also found lodgement in neighbouring France. Glass workers there affiliated with the Universal Federation but remained aloof from the Order itself. Several leading Knights and their sympathisers claimed assemblies in France as early as 1887 and 1888.\(^4^0\) No further proof exists for them at that time; one solitary bookbinder from Ammonay, however, was so enthused by the Order that he applied to join the Knights as a member in 1886 and, with Powderly’s help, was initiated by Knights in Belgium.\(^4^1\) Between 1888 and 1890, two equally enthusiastic French labour activists, F. Veyssier and Abel Davaud, bombarded Powderly and the *Journal of United Labor* with news from France and with their desire to form assemblies in Paris and the provinces. They gathered together enough interested Parisian workers to form several assemblies and waited, as they told American Knights, for the repeal of legislation dating from the aftermath of the Paris Commune and from fears over the power of the First International, which prohibited French workers from joining international bodies with foreign headquarters.\(^4^2\) At this point, French glass workers, according to Albert Delwarte, were also waiting for that repeal to become fully fledged Knights themselves.\(^4^3\)

Like Corcordal in Turin, Veyssier and Davaud implored the American Knights to make a big impression at the Paris Exposition. Both eventually arranged the shipment of banners, flags, portraits and other paraphernalia from the United States to France and set up the Order’s exhibition in the hall assigned to it. Though the *Journal of United Labor* predicted thousands of new recruits before the Exposition ended, a breakdown in communication meant that Powderly did not visit the Exposition, as the 1888 General Assembly had decreed and as he had told Veyssier and Davaud. Poor communication also ensured that the Knights actually forgot to recompense them for their work in arranging the Order’s exhibition, which they had done out of their own pocket, and meant that Knights who did visit Paris failed to meet their French supporters. In the end, Veyssier and Davaud decided to form their own organisation, based to an extent on the Order’s model but not affiliated with it, and the *Journal*’s high hopes were

\(^3^9\) *JUL*, 28 February and 14 March 1889.
\(^4^0\) *Birmingham Daily Post*, 21 October 1887; *Wichita Daily Eagle*, 15 February 1888; *Los Angeles Times*, 31 May 1888.
\(^4^1\) B. Maurice to Powderly, 30 October 1888, Box 48, TVP.
\(^4^2\) *JUL*, 25 October 1888.
\(^4^3\) *JUL*, 6 September 1888.
smashed. It was not until 1893, when Belgian Knights began to organise French assemblies on their own initiative, that the Order finally established itself in France. By then the American Knights were too absorbed with the problems of their declining order to help them in any practical way; but like the Belgian assemblies, those in France survived into the twentieth century.

The Knights made it into the southern hemisphere as well. Australian trade unionists wrote to the Order's headquarters in Philadelphia as early as 1886, requesting more information about the Knights and suggesting some kind of trans-Pacific alliance. Carpenters in Brisbane also led a movement in 1887 for a 'Labour League, founded on the basis of the American Knights of Labour,' and their secretary established contact with the American Knights and declared his intention to form a “Queensland Knights of Labour.” Nothing came of that movement, although newspaper reports suggest that an assembly began at Adelaide in South Australia.

The history of the Australian Knights really began with the arrival of a Canadian organiser, W.W. Lyght, in 1888. He opened local assemblies in Melbourne and Sydney, while local labour activists like Larry Petrie and Samuel Rosa added to the number of assemblies and others, like Arthur Rae, who himself won political office as a Knight, extended the Order into Wagga Wagga. Indeed, the Australian assemblies attracted a large number of other well-known Australian labour activists as well, including poets like John Farrell and Henry Lawson, writers like William Lane and J.R. Davies, and political figures like Dr William Maloney.

Despite these prominent supporters, however, the Australian assemblies struggled to attract a mass membership. They faced fierce opposition from local trade unionists: Knights in Melbourne, for instance, twice tried to secure affiliation with the city's Trades Council and were twice rejected. Trade unionists who initially saw the Knights as a shortcut to independent labour politics, Lloyd Churchward argues, found their solution in the Australian Labor Party instead. As a secret society, the Knights were

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44 C. Deville to Hayes, 28 July 1889, Box 55, TVP; F. Veyssier to Powderly, 20 September 1889, Box 56, TVP; F. Veyssier to Powderly, 28 February 1890, Box 59, TVP; JUL, 9 May 1889.
45 Proceedings of the GA (1894), p. 167; Dommanget, La Chevalerie du Travail Française.
46 W. Lane to Powderly, 12 May 1886, Box 21, TVP.
47 Brisbane Courier, 28 May and 5 September 1887.
48 Brisbane Courier, 12 October 1889; Burra Record, 15 February 1887.
49 Weir, Knights Down Under, p. 228; JUL, 19 February 1891.
51 Melbourne Argus, 11 July 1891 and 15 April 1893.
refused admission to the inaugural congress of that party. Cut off from the mainstream of the Australian labour movement for most of the 1890s, the Knights struggled on into the twentieth century with some minor successes among the miners of Western Australia. They finally rejoined the mainstream in 1899 when their representatives attended the first Australian Trade Union Congress. Yet their numbers and influence remained modest. Only in the elaborateness of their ritual, conducted in locally designed regalia, did Australian Knights equal their American counterparts or those in many other countries.

They certainly failed to equal the achievements of their brethren across the Tasman Sea, in New Zealand. Between 1887 and 1889, local trade unionists in Christchurch and Auckland created their own assemblies, based on scraps of information gleaned from newspapers arriving on ships from the United States, although these disintegrated by the end of the decade. As in Australia, the history of the Knights in New Zealand really began with the arrival of W.W. Lyght. He arrived in Auckland in February 1890, and lectured his way down the North and South Islands, explaining the Order’s principles and in some cases creating local assemblies along the way. When he arrived in Christchurch the remnants of the New Zealand Knights of Labor, who had in the meantime experimented with alternative forms of organisation, returned to the Order’s fold. And in the same year that Lyght helped place the Order in New Zealand on a solid footing, a series of strikes, particularly by seamen and dockers, inspired by related struggles in Australia and as far away as South Africa and Britain, fell to defeat. The Order’s trade union rivals were decimated, and the membership of its assemblies swelled accordingly.

As New Zealand’s Knights advanced through the first half of the 1890s they achieved political and industrial power, in proportional terms at least, in advance of Knights in any other country. That included, Robert Weir argues, the United States as well. A significant fraction of the colony’s legislators were Knights. It is likely that one Premier, John Ballance, was as well. In alliance with the Liberal Party, the Order became a national political force with few peers elsewhere in the labour world; one scholar has even described the Knights as New Zealand’s first true political party.

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54 *Proceedings of the GA* (1898), pp. 4, 49.
Much of the social legislation that made turn-of-the-century New Zealand the envy of many reformers and trade unionists from all over the globe, from female suffrage to old age pensions and the compulsory state-run arbitration of industrial disputes, was due in large part to the lobbying and votes of Knights in and outside Parliament. Yet their numbers and influence soon waned. Their trade union rivals soon recovered from the defeats of 1890. Employers began to attack the Order’s assemblies at the workplace. Ballance’s successor as Premier of the Colony, Richard Seddon, saw the Knights more as an annoyance than an ally. Weir even claims that Knights lost momentum in the latter part of the 1890s precisely because so much of their programme had found its way into legislation. Few working-class organisations can attribute their demise to their own success, and when the New Zealand Knights disintegrated in the early twentieth century they had already reshaped the social and political landscape of the country.

Finally, the Order extended into Africa as well. Robert Weir surmised that ‘oblique references’ to South African Knights found in the Journal of the Knights of Labor probably referred to transient dockers and sailors in and around Cape Town. These references actually referred instead to diamond miners in the town of Kimberley, the unquestioned centre of world diamond extraction, which had by then become concentrated in the hands of De Beers Consolidated Mines. De Beers, one of the great international monopolies of the nineteenth (and twentieth) century, boasted among its directors the arch-imperialist Cecil Rhodes, who served, from 1890 to 1896, as Prime Minister of the Cape Colony. As De Beers restricted the supply of diamonds to raise their price on the international market, causing mass unemployment in Kimberley, miners attempted to work unused mines themselves. Since De Beers enjoyed complete power over local political machinery as well as the supply of diamonds, these attempts failed. In February 1890, a small number of white miners founded the Knights of Labour of South Africa at the Burns Hotel.

Their new order freely borrowed from the practices of other fraternal orders. Adopting the motto ‘Charity, Unity, and Fidelity,’ South African Knights organised into ‘temples’ under a Grand Master and a Grand Council of 13, and created the ranks of first and second degree along Masonic lines. They practised absolute secrecy on the understandable grounds that De Beers, which maintained an extensive system of surveillance in the town, would quickly destroy an organisation based on open lines. While it is virtually impossible to ascertain their numbers, they published a manifesto which

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claimed that ‘our Society has been no unimportant factor in the politics and social events of Kimberley and the Colony at large.’ Nor was this merely the hopeful words of a few isolated militants. One intrepid reporter from a Cape Town magazine infiltrated the Knights and was amazed to find many of Kimberley’s most prominent citizens as well as many local workers at their meetings. South African Knights made contact with the Order’s Philadelphia headquarters in 1891 and 1892. There are references to South African assemblies as late as 1895, but they seem to have faded away soon afterwards. It remains difficult to provide a more detailed narrative of their history due to their absolute secrecy. Even a Royal Commission in 1892 found the task of finding any precise information about the Knights impossible ‘except that the members were bound by oath to carry out any orders which they might receive.’ It seems likely that the South African Knights eventually fell before the combined might of De Beers and the Cape Colony government.

But their struggles led to some unusual consequences. Strict racial stratification of labour had long existed at Kimberley’s mines. Colonial authorities kept black workers, recruited from neighbouring tribes, in ‘compounds,’ a euphemistic term for concentration camps that enforced brutal labour discipline and prevented them from leaving the mines while still under contract. The South African Knights, many of whom used black workers as contractors, feared that De Beers was planning to either replace all white labour with black workers or reduce the wages and conditions of white workers to the level of black labour. Where American Knights sought to organise black workers, South African Knights hoped to protect the jobs and living standards of white workers through the maintenance of a strict colour line. All skilled labour would be reserved for whites. And as Ray and Jack Simons write, this idea ‘of a war on two fronts, against Monopoly Capital and Cheap Coloured Labour, guided the thinking of organized white labour for many decades to come.’

There are suggestions that the Knights established assemblies in other places as well. Several sources point to German assemblies and, given comments that A.G. Denny made in 1886 these assemblies, if they existed,

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64 Manifesto, p. 10; ‘Knights of Labour of South Africa,’ The Lantern, 5 December 1891.
65 JUL, 10 November 1891; Letter from John Law to Powderly, 16 May 1892, Box 72, TVP; New York Times, 22 October 1895.
66 1892 Royal Commission on Labour, Volume II, Foreign Reports, India and the Colonies, p. 85. Found at HCPP.
67 Turrell, Kimberley Diamond Fields, p. 11.
were probably composed of glass workers. At least one scholar refers to an assembly of glass workers in Portugal. One solitary source refers to assemblies in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Interested parties from these countries certainly wrote to Powderly and other leading Knights, but no corroborating evidence exists for assemblies in any of them. Fragments also refer to assemblies in Mexico: G.D.H. Cole mentions only that some unions there ‘became loosely attached’ to the Knights while ‘others imitated its methods.’ The most intriguing reference of all concerns India. The Indian philosopher and nationalist Amrita Lal Roy was so enthused by the Knights during his travels throughout the United States in 1886 that he promised to John Swinton’s Paper, one of the largest American labour newspapers, that on his return to India he would preach the ‘gospel of the Knights of Labor … and their talisman of organization will yet revivify that land.’ No trace survives, however, of any Indian assemblies.

This was the world the Knights built. In some places their assemblies made little headway. Knights in Italy lacked the money to organise more than several hundred workers, those in Australia failed to overcome determined opposition from local trade unions, French Knights suffered from the prevarications and bureaucratic failings of the Order’s American leaders and the South African assemblies crumbled before the corporate-political axis of De Beers and the Cape Colony. But the Knights of Labor also made significant and lasting contributions to the labour movements of many countries. They hastened the growth of trade unionism in Belgium, found enthusiastic supporters in France and Italy, attracted leading figures in the Australian labour movement, united South African diamond miners against one of the great corporations of the age and left deep marks upon the labour movement and political system of New Zealand. The British and Irish Knights never matched the numbers of the Belgian Knights or the political achievements of the Knights in New Zealand, but, as we will see, they made significant contributions of their own to British and Irish history.

The Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland

This book tells their history through seven chapters, each organised on thematic lines but with due attention paid to the evolution of the British and Irish assemblies over the course of their existence. The first chapter

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69 Sacramento Daily Record Union, 3 July 1886.
70 Fones-Wolf, ‘Immigrants, Labor and Capital,’ p. 66.
71 Wichita Daily Eagle, 15 February 1888.
73 John Swinton’s Paper, 30 May 1886.
addresses the origins of those assemblies and locates them in the unique conditions of the 1880s, where the American labour movement seemed on the verge of overtaking its British counterpart, and in the Knights’ fears about uncontrolled immigration on the one hand and their commitment to universal brotherhood, a form of international solidarity, on the other. Chapters 2 and 7 address the rise and fall, respectively, of the British and Irish Knights and place their history in wider transnational context. They both look particularly closely at the role played by the growth and decline of the American Order in the shifting fortunes of their British and Irish branches. Chapter 2 also examines the significance of racial, imperial and, to an extent, religious questions in our story. Knights encountered these questions largely through the prism of the Irish question, and through the many links that connected Irish or Irish-descended workers in Britain, the United States and Ireland itself.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the ways in which the Knights adapted their American Order to British and Irish conditions. The third concerns the ways in which British and Irish Knights interpreted the cultural practices and organisational forms of their order, and why they failed to follow their American cousins in one crucial respect: their complete lack of female members. The fourth deals with industrial relations, particularly how British and Irish Knights interpreted their order’s positions on strikes, boycotts, arbitration and cooperation. Both chapters point to one major conclusion: regardless of any cultural differences between British, Irish and American workers, Knights in Britain and Ireland followed the advice and the guidelines that the Order’s American leaders gave them more closely than many, probably even most, Knights in the United States.

Chapters 5 and 6 position the Knights within the context of the British labour movement. The fifth takes up the political ventures of the assemblies and places the Knights of Labor within the early movement for independent working-class politics. The sixth chapter deals with the Knights and the trade union movement, both in terms of the role played by conflict with rival unions in the Order’s British and Irish history, and the Order’s own influence over the development of the British and Irish labour movement. Both chapters demonstrate the significant role the Knights played in the great changes that swept through the British labour movement during the 1880s and 1890s. These changes, in time, led to the birth of the British Labour Party and the rise of the British trade unions as a movement truly representative of the British working class.

An appendix provides details of all the British and Irish assemblies, including, where known, their name, number, years of operation and the occupations they organised. British and Irish Knights, as Chapter 3 makes clear, followed the same hierarchical progression as the American Knights
from the basic unit, the local assembly, to district assemblies, which brought together five or more local assemblies in the same geographical area, and finally to the General Assembly, which met once a year and proposed, debated and adopted resolutions that would be enacted by the general officers. Those officers were headed by the General Master Workman, a post that Terence Powderly occupied for all except the final months of the British and Irish assemblies, and included a General Secretary, General Treasurer (these last two posts were combined in 1888), and General Worthy Foreman, this last charged with overseeing the Order’s ritual. Throughout this book I spell the Order’s name in the American style and only refer to the “Knights of Labour” when that spelling is used in quotation. With those basic points in order, we now turn to the local, national and transnational forces that led the Knights of Labor to first establish their assemblies in Britain and Ireland.