At the end of 1881 the potters of Staffordshire went on strike; in 1882, they returned to work defeated. The potters had called that action to force their employers to participate in the formal arbitration and conciliation machinery that had governed the pottery industry until the end of the 1870. Their local unions emerged from the defeat in poor shape, and the potters’ leaders decided that if they wanted to restore arbitration to their industry they needed a single, strong union that could negotiate on their behalf from a position of strength. When they met at Hanley to establish that union, the National Order of Potters, in September 1882, the potters emphasised their desire to break with the ineffective unions of the past by basing their new organisation on a model sourced from abroad. The newspapers all agreed that ‘this new Trades Union shall be based upon principles in many respects similar to those of the new American Trade Organisation, known as the Knights of Labour.’

The press could be forgiven for thinking that the Knights, already 13 years old, were in fact a new movement. Their leaders had only recently made the name and existence of their order public, and the Knights of Labor only became widely known in the United States, let alone elsewhere, two or three years later. In this context the decision of the Staffordshire potters to imitate an obscure American fraternal order becomes only more significant. The American pottery industry, writes Frank Thistlewaite, was ‘the result of a direct colonization from the Five Towns of Staffordshire.’ Potters routinely

migrated back and forth across the Atlantic. Ties of kinship and friendship spanned the ocean too. When potters in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Ohio became early recruits of the Knights of Labor, their colleagues in Staffordshire soon heard of it. After their local unions were smashed in the strike of 1881–82, the Staffordshire potters naturally turned to the Order of their American cousins as the model for their own new union.

The Staffordshire potters kept unusually well abreast of developments within the American labour movement, and were not representative of British and Irish workers as a whole. But the reasons behind their decision to base the National Order of Potters on the Knights of Labor illustrates the local, national and transnational processes, trends and considerations that led the Knights to establish their assemblies in Britain and Ireland. One of these was migration. The international movement of potters and other workers enabled the spread of new ideas and institutions across oceans and continents, but also raised fears among trade unionists that mass immigration might endanger the labour movement and drive down wages. American Knights held those fears particularly strongly. Their desire to regulate immigration, if not prevent it altogether, drove them to seek legislation from Congress but also, at the same time, to organise workers overseas before they immigrated to the United States. Another major factor behind the origins of the Knights in Britain and Ireland was the unusual relationship between the British and American labour movements in the 1880s. For most of the nineteenth century the American labour movement appeared to be a pale imitation of its British counterpart, organising proportionally less workers than in Britain and basing American trade unions on earlier British models. In the 1880s, however, that picture was turned almost upside down. During that decade the British labour movement faced severe challenges while the Knights of Labor led an unprecedented upswing of union membership and working-class struggles in the United States. Like the Staffordshire potters, some British workers and radicals now looked to America for solutions to the problems they faced at home.

The story of how the Knights of Labor established assemblies in Britain and Ireland also raises serious questions regarding a central theme in American labour history: American exceptionalism. For labour historians, that term refers to the fact that American workers never built a durable and influential labour or socialist party as their counterparts did elsewhere in the developed world, that American trade unions almost invariably organised a smaller proportion of the labour force than trade unions in other industrial countries, and that American workers supposedly never displayed the class consciousness so prevalent among workers in Europe.

The first systematic attempt to explain these differences came in 1906 with the German economist Werner Sombart's short work, Why Is there
No Socialism in the United States? Sombart put them down to the higher standards of living that American workers enjoyed, and their overwhelming interest in gaining immediate material benefits rather than in far-reaching social change.3 John Commons, Selig Perlman and Gerald Grob, the leading representatives of the ‘Commons’ or ‘Wisconsin’ School, advanced Sombart’s arguments still further. They described what Sombart saw as the overriding materialism of American workers as ‘job-consciousness’ in contrast to the socialist implications behind the term ‘class-consciousness’. Perlman and Grob in particular saw the rise of the American Federation of Labor in the late nineteenth and twentieth century as the victory of that principle over a utopian strain, which Grob termed ‘reform unionism,’ present in the early American labour movement, and which culminated in the rise of the Knights of Labor.4 Other historians, in the 1950s especially, added that any conflicts that arose in American society centred on status anxieties and not class conflict. Historians began to challenge these assumptions in earnest from the 1960s onwards. Many argued that the class consciousness of American workers fractured along racial, ethnic, religious, nationality or gender lines. Many also claimed that the severe repression that American employers and government directed against organised labour and radical politics accounted for the smaller size of the trade union movement and the lack of a labour or socialist party. Yet the idea of American exceptionalism, Sean Wilentz argued in an influential article in 1984, remained at the heart of their wider narrative.5

Wilentz disagreed with the tendency of American labour historians to make comparisons in which, as Michael Hanagan has more recently put it, ‘American workers are denied class-consciousness while European workers brim over with it.’6 Historians are often wont to generalise about the failings of their scholarly predecessors, and in the process they often fail to recognise the innovations, complexities and insights of those predecessors. American labour historians ante-Wilentz unearthed rich layers of militancy, class consciousness and radical politics. In recent decades, however, the arguments behind American exceptionalism have come under closer scrutiny and faced more serious challenges. Some historians, like Wilentz and Hanagan, reject exceptionalism altogether and see it as the consequence of an outmoded

4 See especially Commons, Labor in the United States; S. Perlman, Theory of the Labor Movement; Grob, Workers and Utopia; Hoxie, Trade Unionism in the United States.
Marxist interpretation that compares all labour movements to an ahistorical, class-conscious and socialist gold standard. Others, like Kim Voss, argue that the picture of an exceptional American labour movement remains valid in a twentieth-century context, but that this picture came about as the result of contingent historical events and processes, not because of essential characteristics inherent in American society or the American worker. American exceptionalism, Voss argues, was not inevitable: it was made.

The Knights of Labor naturally figure prominently in these arguments, whether in terms of their international activities or their history in the United States. Voss argues that the main features of American exceptionalism developed after the Order’s defeat in the United States. She adds that the lessons that American trade unionists took from that defeat, to avoid political entanglements and to view with caution any attempt to extend trade unionism beyond the skilled trades, ensured that the Americans fell behind their European counterparts. Robert Weir makes his rejection of American exceptionalism one of the major themes of his recent study of Knights in New Zealand. It is also a major theme of this work. In chapters 5 and 6, which deal respectively with politics and the trade unions, we engage with the idea of American exceptionalism in more specific terms. The present chapter sketches the broad outlines of that debate and finds that the American labour movement was exceptional in the 1880s for its high numbers and strength, not for its weakness.

Lenin once wrote that in a revolutionary situation, ‘it is usually insufficient for “the lower classes not to want” to live in the old way; it is also necessary that “the upper classes should be unable” to live in the old way.’ To these ‘objective’ parameters he added ‘subjective’ ones: for a revolution to actually occur, the revolutionary classes needed the determination and will to topple the existing regime at a stroke. Transnational organising has its own version of the same principle. Objectively, some latent desire must exist in the foreign country which the transnational body can satisfy; subjectively, that transnational body must have the motive, will and resources to expand outside its home country in the first place. This chapter follows that logic, and deals firstly with the objective side of the equation. We find that in the 1880s the unusual strength of the American labour movement, and the stagnation that afflicted its British counterpart for much of the decade, provided the

---

8 Voss, Making of American Exceptionalism.
9 Weir, Knights Down Under.
space for an American movement to take root on British soil. This chapter then explores the subjective side of the equation. We find that American Knights expanded overseas due to a combination of high-minded feelings of international solidarity, their desire to stem the tide of mass immigration and the initiative of an unusually powerful assembly of glassworkers, Local Assembly 300, whose deep pockets subsidised the Order's first organising missions in Europe. This chapter began with the potters of Staffordshire. We will end with the window glassworkers of England and America, and the Order's first significant British branch, Local Assembly 3504.

The Unique Decade: British and American Labour in the 1880s

Comparisons between the British and American labour movements have generally followed a recognisable pattern. Most observers would have agreed with the American economist M.B. Hammond, who wrote in 1911 that:

in nearly all its important aspects, the history of the labor movement in the United States repeats that of Great Britain ... English artisans brought the institutions of unionism to this country, and men trained in the English trade unions have not infrequently been the leaders in the class struggle in America.¹¹

When Henry Pelling compared the two movements 43 years later he reached much the same conclusions: 'The American labour movement, in so far as it followed the British pattern at all, was about half a century behind it.' The Knights of Labor properly arrived on the American scene in the 1880s, about 50 years after Robert Owen's Grand National Consolidated Trades Union. Both organisations were general unions that aimed to replace private industry with a series of cooperative enterprises. The craft unions of the American Federation of Labor rose to pre-eminence in the 1890s, 40 or 50 years after the British new model unions, like the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, 'which they undoubtedly set out to imitate.' The Federation itself, Pelling adds, 'came into being as the expression of the interests of the skilled craftsmen; and it too represented for many years only a small “aristocracy” of the workers.'¹²

Yet a very different view prevailed in the 1880s, as two contemporary American economists writing about the British labour movement in 1889

¹¹ M.B. Hammond, ‘Six Decades of Trade Unionism in America,’ The Dial (1 November 1911).
made clear. ‘There is nothing of the compactness and uniformity which were aimed at in a great centralized organization like the Knights of Labor in the United States,’ wrote Edward Cummings. The English unions, he added, resembled ‘some of the older unions in the United States.’

Professor Albert S. Bolles of the Pennsylvania Bureau of Labor Statistics observed, after returning from an investigation of labour conditions in Europe, that American trade unionists ‘would do well to pattern after the English.’ By that he meant that they should adopt conservative policies and strike less often.

These views are difficult to square with a picture of American trade unions as unceasingly weak and backward compared with their British equivalents. They hint at the first part of our explanation of the origins of the Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland. Even Pelling, who saw the Americans as 50 years behind trends in Britain, also claimed that the Knights became a mass movement at one of the few points in history when the American labour movement matched or even exceeded the numbers of its British counterpart, and when that British counterpart faced serious challenges from within and without. To many British observers in the 1880s, the Knights represented the future of trade unionism, and the unions of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) represented its past. That unprecedented situation was largely the work of the Knights themselves, of course, and it provided unusually favourable conditions for an American working-class organisation to establish its branches in the home of the trade union movement.

The shifting fortunes of the British and American labour movements were in part the result of wider social and economic changes over the course of the nineteenth century. Pelling argued that the backwardness of the American trade unions was most powerfully shaped by the relatively late industrial development of the United States compared with Britain. He broadly shared that view with Friedrich Engels, who wrote in 1886 that Britain’s foreign competitors ‘have arrived at about the same phase of development as English manufacture in 1844. With regard to America,’ he added:

the parallel is indeed most striking … we find in America the same struggles for a shorter working-day, for a legal limitation of the working time, especially of women and children in factories; we find the truck system in full blossom, and the cottage-system, in rural districts, made use of by the ‘bosses’ as a means of domination over the workers.

---

14 *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 15 September 1889.
A similar level of industrial development, in other words, ensured similar industrial conditions and, above all, a similar level of trade unionism, even when the two examples were separated by 40 years.

That equation, however, fails to capture some of the nuances of American labour history. As does Pelling’s idea of a 50-year lag between the American and British labour movements. The Knights of Labor, for instance, began in 1869, less than 40 years after Owen’s Grand National. The Order’s American predecessor, the Brotherhood of the Union, created by the reformer and novelist George Lippard, had emerged nearly 20 years earlier, in 1849. The Brotherhood shared many characteristics with the Knights and the Grand National, including secrecy, fraternal ritual and regalia, and sweeping aims: to free workers, in Lippard’s words, from ‘the death-grip of the monopolist and the Tyrant’ and to make ‘the American Continent ... the Homestead of redeemed Labor.’

Pelling’s narrative omitted the National Labor Union, which operated from 1866 to 1874 and at one point boasted a total membership of more than 100,000. The craft unions that eventually created the American Federation of Labor in 1886 were also closer in time to the new model unions on which they were based. Trade unionists such as Adolphe Strasser and Samuel Gompers developed organisations, like their own Cigarmakers’ International Union, that combined the benefit plans and high dues of the new model unions in the 1870s, and even became known under the heading of the ‘new unionism.’ The supposed 50-year lag is thus reduced to 15 or 20 years. This is not surprising given that British immigrants to the United States brought with them the latest ideas and methods, even if the American industrial scene did not permit them to flourish immediately.

The difference between British and American industrial output, and industrial development as a whole, also narrowed over the course of the nineteenth century. For a long time, American industry followed the British lead, whether in the textile mills of Massachusetts, the coal mines of Pennsylvania, the iron and steel factories of the industrial North – and in the example that began this chapter, the pottery industry. Even after the great stimulus to industrial output provided by the Civil War, British industry continued to lead the way, a fact reflected in all the major indexes

__Class in England__, New York, 1887. Found at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/02/25.htm


of industrial development, from annual steel production to coal extraction.20 This lead soon narrowed. Between 1870 and 1913, the British share of world industrial production fell from 30 to 15 percent.21 By the end of the nineteenth century, both Germany and the United States produced more than the erstwhile workshop of the world. British industrialists learned the harsh lesson that industrial development, like other forms of historical development, is at once uneven and combined. Their rivals drew on British innovations and then, as the century came to a close, built on them with their own innovations. The laggards became the leaders and the old leaders, as British employers discovered, soon lagged behind.

A similar process of combined and uneven development conditioned the progress of the British and American labour movements too. Historians have often drawn analogies between the Knights and the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, which shared more than an attachment to fraternal ritual and regalia. Michael Hanagan writes that these ‘mass industrial unions’ each spearheaded the development of the labour movement in their respective countries and, after they failed, were each succeeded by ‘narrow craft unions led by conservative leaders who scorned the mass of unskilled workers and maintained an authoritarian control over their own membership.’22 According to Pelling and Engels, at least, the similar evolution of these two movements can be explained by the similar level of industrial development in which each movement arose.

Yet the Knights of Labor arose in a very different context to the Grand National. Improvements in industrial technique at the end of the nineteenth century threatened to make the skilled worker completely obsolete, a process that had only begun in Robert Owen’s day. The Knights concluded that craft unions, based on the skilled trades, also faced obsolescence and insisted that only the unity of what they called the ‘producing classes,’ under the Order’s banner, could deliver workers from the evils of the wage system. The concentration of capital in the era of the Knights of Labor also reached levels undreamt of in the heyday of the Grand National. Knights, again, held that craft unions were no match for the great corporations, trusts and monopolies of the day, and that only a single organisation of all producers could wield the necessary industrial and, perhaps, political power to challenge the owners of concentrated wealth and prevent them

from corrupting the democratic institutions of the Republic. Both trends proceeded at a faster rate in the United States than in Britain: by the late 1880s, as Eric Hobsbawm recognised, American industry was on the whole more mechanised than its British counterpart.

The Knights of Labor might have adopted the form and some of the content of the Grand National. The Order, however, was no throwback to the early nineteenth century, as Gerald Grob once claimed. It emerged as a response to an American industrial scene fast becoming more mechanised, and more productive, than its British contemporary. By the end of the nineteenth century the Americans took the lead in industrial output and the British never regained it. For a time, the same trend started to develop among the respective labour movements of the two countries. When the Knights of Labor reached a million members in the summer of 1886, in addition to the several hundred thousand Americans enrolled in trade unions, for the first time the American labour movement organised more workers than the British TUC. At the same time that the United States began to emerge as the world’s leading industrial power, it gave rise to an order that briefly became the largest labour organisation in the world.

The 1880s proved a crucial decade in the history of the British labour movement too. In 1880, membership of British trade unions stood at just over half a million and represented about 4 percent of the working population. In 1888 that membership stood at 817,000 workers and then rose to 1,470,000 in 1890. When the 1880s began, the TUC brought together a collection of unions that almost entirely represented male workers in skilled trades. The numbers organised into the unions of the TUC remained stagnant until the end of the decade, when the rise of the ‘new unionism,’ a subject we explore at length in Chapter 6, led to the extension of trade unions into less skilled occupations. The new unionism petered out in the 1890s, and it would take until the 1910s for the British labour movement to consolidate itself as representative of workers of all levels of skill, reaching 25 percent of the working population in 1914; but the 1880s saw the first major steps towards that level of representation.

In that decade the British trade union movement faced serious challenges and underwent far-reaching changes. British trade unionists faced the

prospect of mechanisation, skill dilution and the rise of a new layer of semi-skilled operatives who worked a growing number of machines, even if the markets of the Empire sheltered British industry from foreign competition and ensured that automation proceeded at a slower pace than in America. They faced a growing number of women entering the labour market. They also faced new challenges to the Liberal orthodoxy that dominated working-class politics after the collapse of the Chartists. The Lib-Lab pact, as it was known, ensured that a number of trade unionists were returned to the House of Commons on a Liberal ticket, and in 1885 an unprecedented 12 working-class Liberals entered Parliament. Some historians even consider them the first Labour MPs.

Working-class Liberalism had never entirely subsumed other radical working-class traditions, however. Movements for national rights and land reform in Ireland and Scotland became causes all over Britain and Ireland in the 1880s. Charles Parnell and Michael Davitt headed the Irish Land League, an organisation that aimed to free Irish farmers from the exploitation of landlords and argued for Home Rule. In 1881, the League inaugurated a campaign of ostracism against Irish landlords, named after Captain Boycott, who became its first victim. Home Rule became a central political issue in Britain and Ireland and led to a split in the Liberal Party between Gladstonians, who supported it, and Liberal Unionists, who opposed it. These questions also energised radical forces outside the Liberal Party. In Scotland the crofters, small tenant farmers in hock to (mainly) absentee landlords, resisted attempts by those landlords to drive them off the land. Their struggles gained them wide sympathy in Scotland and in the rest of Britain and Ireland. Representatives of the crofters even formed a political movement around the issue and elected several MPs in 1885.

These movements did not seriously threaten the Lib-Lab pact. Yet the emergence of a new British socialist movement eventually did. The Social Democratic Federation (SDF), founded in 1881, the Fabian Society, created in 1884, and the Socialist League, formed in 1885 after a split from the SDF, all provided new critiques of British society and, as we will see in more detail in later chapters, also contributed to the rise of independent working-class politics and the new unionism. These groups all remained numerically

small throughout the 1880s. Some historians have questioned whether they represented a significant or influential movement at all. They did, however, recruit a number of trade unionists who would soon become major figures in the labour movement, including Tom Mann, John Burns and Ben Tillett, and gained notoriety when they led demonstrations of unemployed workers through the streets of London and held meetings on Trafalgar Square. Older strains of British radicalism, dating back to the Chartist agitation, also survived into the 1880s. London’s Radical Clubs helped bring about the SDF. Reynolds’s Newspaper, edited by an ex-Chartist, printed ‘anti-monarchist and radical-patriotic sentiments’ for hundreds of thousands of readers every day, as it had done since the 1860s. Like many other radicals, those who wrote for Reynolds’s moved towards socialist positions and began to advocate ‘collectivist social reform’ in the 1880s.

British radicals viewed the British trade unions of the early to mid-1880s as conservative and aloof or, at the very least, overly cautious. Tom Mann, both a socialist and a member of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, summed up the view of this small but growing tendency when he insisted in an oft-quoted 1886 pamphlet that ‘none of the important societies have policies other than endeavouring to keep wages from falling. The true union policy of aggression seems entirely lost sight of.’ Mann’s manifesto did not herald an immediate transformation in the tactics or the considerations of the trade union movement. Even in the years of the new unionism his hopes were only partially realised. But others like him sought new ways to revitalise the unions and looked for alternatives to them. In chapters 5 and 6, especially, we will see how many of them found such an alternative in the Knights of Labor.

Similar criticisms extended to the record of the TUC leadership on the international stage. British trade unionists pioneered international working-class cooperation during the Chartist period. They built the First International in the 1860s. Their record in the 1880s, by contrast, was poor. They held two International Trades Union Congresses, one at Paris in 1886 and the other at London in 1888. At these Congresses the representatives of the TUC seemed more concerned with fighting socialism than promoting international labour cooperation. When a German socialist at the 1886 Congress described Henry Broadhurst, the secretary of the TUC’s Parliamentary Committee

34 T. Mann, What a Compulsory Eight Hours Working Day Means to the Workers (London, 1886).
and a Lib-Lab MP, as a traitor to the cause of labour for accepting a post in the Liberal government, John Burnett of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers responded that ‘the attack against English Trades Unions came very inappropriately from the representative of a nation which more than any other country helped to keep down the rate of wages.’ At the 1888 Congress, the Parliamentary Committee adopted the standing orders of the TUC and excluded representatives from political parties. As trade unions were illegal in Germany and some other European countries, this effectively meant, as the German Social-Democrat Eduard Bernstein noted, ‘a simple exclusion of all German delegates.’ To its British critics, the TUC seemed both isolated on the international stage and incapable of representing more than a narrow aristocracy of British workers.

With the trade union movement showing its limitations, and with the emergence of new radical causes and the rejuvenation of old ones, it was only natural that many critics of the British labour movement looked to the United States for inspiration. British radicals had long looked to emulate American republican and democratic institutions. Scottish and Irish radicals, thanks to the particularly strong flows of migration that connected them to the United States, held the American republic in especially high regard. The case of Reynolds’s Newspaper is especially relevant here as it became an early propagandist for the extension of the Knights of Labor into Britain and Ireland. In the 1860s, wrote Henry Pelling, ‘its leading columns … reveal a partisan enthusiasm for American institutions that can only be paralleled in modern times [the late 1950s] by the enthusiasm of the Communist Daily Worker for the Soviet way of life.’ In one celebrated article the paper even hoped that the United States would annex Canada. That enthusiasm faded by the turn of the century; but in the 1880s Reynolds’s remained the leading advocate of American democratic institutions across Britain and Ireland.

Aside from the Knights of Labor, three individuals demonstrated the unusually strong influence of American radicalism in Britain during the 1880s. The first was the economist Henry George, whose book Progress

37 Pelling, British Left, esp. chs 1–4.
39 Pelling, British Left, pp. 23–24.
40 Pelling, British Left, p. 53.
and Poverty, first published in 1879, sold hundreds of thousands of copies throughout the English-speaking world. George had an enduring influence in Britain and Ireland. According to David Guetze, he spearheaded ‘the cross-fertilization of Progressivism in Britain and the United States.’ His single tax, a land reform which he presented as a panacea for all social ills, inspired such varied figures as Joseph Chamberlain, Tom Mann and Michael Davitt. When 51 Labour MPs were polled in 1906 for a list of the most influential authors in their lives, Henry George came in at the top. George also became a hero to Irish nationalists when British authorities in Ireland imprisoned him during a speaking tour there.

Scottish crofters and their supporters used George’s proposals for land reform as the basis for movements like the Scottish Land Restoration League, which arose out of the enthusiasm generated by George’s speaking tour in Scotland in 1884. At that point Glasgow, as Bernard Aspinwall writes, ‘was a hotbed of Henry George’s Single Tax enthusiasts, supported by two papers.’ The importance of land reform as a live political issue across Britain owed much to George’s writings and his speeches around Britain and Ireland. Although George was not a socialist, his work inspired the political careers of a whole generation of British socialists. Tom Mann, for instance, traced his interest in political matters to the time when he first read Progress and Poverty. Ironically, the attention that George paid to widening social inequalities in the United States actually helped to end British radicals’

enchantment with American democracy, as these inequalities suggested that
democratic institutions alone were not enough to cure the social problems
of industrial life. This disenchantment, as James D. Young writes, was
especially strong in Scotland.

The second American was Edward Bellamy. His utopian – or dystopian,
depending on one's point of view – novel, *Looking Backward*, followed
a young American man who is transported forward in time to the year
2000, to a society where the social problems of Gilded Age society have
been solved through the nationalisation of production and distribution.
It became an instant international bestseller on publication in 1887 and
sold millions of copies worldwide. In Australia *Looking Backward* became
even more influential than *Progress and Poverty*. The novel immediately
spawned nationalist clubs, so named by Bellamy in an attempt to distance
his utopia from the odious word socialism, and British enthusiasts set up the
Nationalization of Labour Society with its own journal, the *Nationalization
News*. The orderly, planned and bureaucratic vision of the future outlined
in *Looking Backward* also influenced the early development of the Fabian
Society, and the English socialist William Morris conceived his own utopian
novel, *News From Nowhere*, as a riposte to that vision.

The third American was Laurence Gronlund, for some years a leader
of the American Socialist Labor Party. He designed his major work,
*The Co-operative Commonwealth*, to present socialist principles in plain
language to an English-speaking audience, and that book encountered little
competition as no adequate English translation of Marx's *Capital* existed
for most of the 1880s. Gronlund certainly became well known in Britain.
Two editions of *The Co-operative Commonwealth* were published in London;
George Bernard Shaw edited the second. When William Morris chaired
a debate at London’s Hall of Science in 1887, with the motion ‘Is Socialism

---

50 Young, ‘Changing Images,’ p. 78.
54 Pelling, *British Left*, p. 64.
56 Pelling, *British Left*, p. 64.
Sound?,' one of the participants claimed that The Co-operative Commonwealth is justly one of the favourites of Socialists, and in some sense may be called their New Testament, as Karl Marx’s book may be called their Old Testament. Gronlund also travelled across the Atlantic and his speeches had a significant effect on many early socialists, particularly in Scotland. Doubtless his listeners were encouraged and flattered by the prediction at the conclusion of his work that ‘for many reasons, either Great Britain or the United States – the universal colony – may be considered the place where the New Commonwealth will be first successfully established.

The popularity of these Americans in Britain illustrates the unique historical conjuncture that took shape during the 1880s. On the one hand, the speedy industrial development of the United States, and the social dislocations this development caused, stimulated the growth of the American labour movement. By 1886, that movement numbered upwards of 1 million workers and seemed to have caught up with its British counterpart for good. On the other hand, until the upswing of 1889 the British labour movement suffered from stagnating membership and faced mounting criticism from the representatives of new radical movements, particularly the small but growing British socialist parties. Many of these critics looked to the United States for answers. Through influential figures such as George, Bellamy and Gronlund, and through the powerful example of the Knights of Labor, whose methods seemed eminently suitable for an age of drastic technological change and the rise of powerful trusts and corporations, they found them.

During the 1880s, in other words, all the central tenets of American exceptionalism – the weakness of the American labour movement; its imitation of foreign, particularly British trends; and its tendency to lag behind those foreign trends – were turned on their head. The British and Irish Knights were a product of this unusual state of affairs. But the stagnation of the British labour movement, and the rapid advances of the Americans, did not create the Order’s British and Irish assemblies on their own. To return to Lenin’s formula, conditions were ripe for a transnational movement to flourish on foreign soil. Now we must explain why the Knights of Labor went abroad in the first place.

58 Young, ‘Changing Images,’ p. 79.
The Internationalism of the Knights of Labor

In 1861, most Americans were completely absorbed by the terrifying prospect of civil war between the northern and southern states. Not Uriah Stephens. A Philadelphian tailor by trade, Stephens wrote to a friend in New York of a very different vision that had haunted him for some time. ‘I do not claim to be gifted with the power of prophesy,’ he began:

But I can see ahead of me an organization that will cover the globe. It will include men and women of every craft, creed and color: It will cover every race worth saving. It will come in my time, I hope. Its groundwork will be secrecy, its rule obedience, and its guiding star mutual assistance. It will make labor honourable and profitable and lessen its burdens; it will make idleness a crime, render wars impossible, and obliterate national lines.60

Eight years later, Stephens created the Knights of Labor with six other garment cutters. His order never spanned the entire globe, ended war or did away with national borders. But the Knights came closer to his dream than he had any cause to expect.

The Knights have often been left out of the history of international working-class movements. Most scholarship concerns those movements based in Europe, whether the four revolutionary Internationals, the various international trade union federations, or the other trade unions, fraternal orders, cooperative congresses and political tendencies that made up the international labour movement. The idea of American exceptionalism also fails to account for an order that extended to three other continents and became one of the largest global working-class movements of its day.61 The Order’s international history, however, was no aberration. The Knights fit comfortably within wider nineteenth-century patterns and traditions of working-class internationalism on both sides of the Atlantic. We need to address these patterns and traditions in order to fully understand and contextualise the internationalism of the Knights of Labor.

The causes of labour internationalism have provoked debate and disagreement for nearly 200 years. The very idea of international solidarity, after all, is not always an automatic response to the problems that workers have always faced, particularly given the pervasive nationalism within industrial countries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. George Orwell even claimed that ‘patriotism is usually stronger than class hatred, and always stronger than any kind of internationalism.’62 In general,

60 Proceedings of the GA (1897), n. pag.
working-class internationalism has always resulted from a combination of ideas and principles, whether sourced from Marx, Bakunin, Mazzini or some other thinker or set of traditions, and from material pressures, for example the desire to prevent foreign workers from undermining local wages. Mere ideological appeals for international solidarity seldom attract many workers without an appeal to self-interest as well; material interests alone seldom lead to international cooperation. John Logue even argues that the idea that international solidarity accords with workers’ material interests no longer makes sense, except as a cultural trait that ‘developed from concrete material self-interest grounded in the pattern of migration of skilled labor in the middle of the last century, at the time when modern trade union organization had its inception.’ This view, needless to say, is a contentious one.

As soon as workers began to define themselves or were themselves defined in opposition to other social classes, a process first powerfully expressed by the Chartists and which became increasingly apparent in continental Europe after the revolutions of 1848, they confronted the fact that production and trade were not constrained by national borders or national feeling. Their products competed with those made elsewhere in the world. The level of wages paid in other countries helped to determine theirs. And the movement of people across national borders raised the question of international working-class cooperation most powerfully of all. The preindustrial or artisanal patterns of migration that Logue mentioned above became important here. Nineteenth-century artisans maintained an older tradition of *compagnonnage*, whereby journeymen travelled from town to town and often country to country to practise their trade before settling down in a single place. Such traditions exposed them to craftsmen in other countries, to working conditions in other places and fostered an understanding that artisans in the same trade shared interests that transcended national borders.

These movements were nothing next to the huge waves of migration stimulated by industrial development in Europe, North America and parts of Asia. That development generated an industrial core in western and central Europe, the eastern seaboard and Midwest of the United States and, towards the end of the century, in parts of Japan. Regions on the periphery of this development, especially eastern and southern Europe, urban China

---


64 For an overview of these processes see M. van der Linden, ‘Labor Internationalism,’ in van der Linden (ed.), *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labour History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).
and rural Japan, saw little industrial development but were nevertheless transformed by the monetisation of their economies, the privatisation of their common lands and the general destruction, as David Montgomery writes, of ‘long-established patterns of economic activity.’ This destruction encouraged millions of men and women to seek employment in the industrial regions where, they knew, wages remained far higher than at home. At the same time, millions of workers moved from one part of this industrial core to another in search of work, higher wages, new opportunities and, in the case of many radicals, freedom from political repression at the hands of European governments.

These migrations raised serious questions for local workers, especially those in trade unions. Until 1848 those workers were mainly concerned with asserting themselves as an independent social force. After that date, as Marcel van der Linden writes, workers began to practise what he terms ‘sub-national internationalism,’ where local groups of workers sought alliances with local groups in other countries to deal with the consequences of immigration. Trade unionists in one country financially supported strikes in another. They did so for idealistic reasons as well as to prevent defeated strikers from migrating elsewhere in search of work. Trade unionists also cooperated with their colleagues in other countries to prevent employers from recruiting foreign workers to break their own strikes. These efforts at cooperation culminated in the meeting in September 1864 of mostly French and British workers at St Martin’s Hall in London. The gathering, called to defend the cause of Polish national independence, instead began the International Workingmen’s Association (IWMA), or First International.

London, the International’s centre, as Susan Milner writes, became a ‘minor International’ in its own right during the middle decades of the nineteenth century and drew political refugees and migrant workers from across the Continent. Trade unionists in the city hoped to draw on those international connections in order to reverse attempts by employers to import foreign workers to break strikes, force out union men and drive down standards. ‘In the short term,’ Milner argues, ‘international links could be used by British workers as a means of creating solidarity and thus dissuading foreign workers from taking jobs in Britain during strike movements.’ In the longer term, she adds, they ‘saw the chance to spread the principles and methods of British trade unionism abroad, which would have the result of raising the standard of living in other countries, thus reducing the threat of

Self-interest was not the only motivation here. In a number of major strikes, whether by Parisian bronze workers in 1867, or the building workers of Geneva and the silk workers of Lyon in 1868, the IWMA's ability to marshal international resources, particularly those of British trade unionists, proved crucial to the workers' victories. The International also brought trade unionists into contact with socialists and anarchists, most under the banner of Marx and Bakunin respectively. Members of the IMWA, whatever their own political views, practised an internationalism based on their perceived material interests and political principles, and each informed the other.

The First International broke apart in the 1870s. Bitter and violent disagreements between Marx and Bakunin and their followers led to damaging factional fights. The repression unleashed across Europe against the International after the defeat of the Paris Commune reduced its numbers. The growth of national movements, first in Britain and then elsewhere, combined with the gradual integration of these movements into national political and industrial life, encouraged many trade unionists to abandon it. But working-class internationalism was not only a European phenomenon: American workers had attempted to forge their own international connections over the course of the nineteenth century for much the same reasons. Tens of millions of immigrants arrived in the United States over the course of the nineteenth century, bringing Chartism and Owenism from Britain, socialism from Germany and anarchism from France. Like London in the middle of the nineteenth century, many American cities in the second half of the century resembled Internationals of a kind. But immigrant workers also competed with American workers and threatened to swamp the fledgling American labour movement. Even before the Civil War, the American Typographical Union established international connections in order to prevent English and Scottish printers from immigrating and thus flooding the American labour market.

American workers’ first major response to immigration came with the creation of the National Labor Union (NLU) in 1866. The crucial support of workers in Britain and elsewhere in Europe to the North during the Civil War made the idea of international cooperation more appealing. William Sylvis, leader of the NLU, saw the solution to the suffering of workers on

---

71 Yearley, *Britons*, p. 54.
both side of the Atlantic as ‘the united and fraternal agency of our organs of labor.’ The NLU soon developed ties with the First International on the other side of the ocean. Sylvis sent A.C. Cameron, editor of the influential Chicago labour paper the *Workingmen’s Advocate*, to the International’s 1869 Conference at Basel. Cameron’s mission was to establish some kind of ‘closer union’ between American and European workers, as he told the International’s General Council, that would regulate the flow of migrants across the Atlantic and enable the growth of the American labour movement. He and the delegates at Basel laid the groundwork for an Emigration Bureau to do just that.

The collapse of both the NLU and the First International in the 1870s ended these tentative moves towards a transatlantic alliance. The Emigration Bureau, as Samuel Bernstein writes, ‘very likely remained a paper body.’ Sections of the First International nevertheless survived in the United States throughout the decade and even into the 1880s. Individual trade unions and trade unionists also maintained and expanded their transatlantic connections in the void left by the disintegration of the NLU. Organised ironworkers, cigarmakers, boilermakers and shipbuilders in the United States all sought to establish agreements with trade unionists in Europe, particularly Britain, concerning the mutual exchange of union cards, sending delegates to each other’s conventions and even combining their forces in a single international union.

All these activities, Clifton Yearley writes, ‘seemed uninspired compared with the plans laid by the Knights of Labor.’ The Order’s extension into Europe, Australasia and Africa went far beyond any previous American attempts to become a part of the international labour movement, and to play a leading role in it. But the Knights represented the continuation and,

ultimately, the culmination of American working-class internationalism. They also represented the continuation of European patterns of internationalism. The Knights formulated their own conception of international solidarity to match those of European socialists and anarchists, and they called this principle ‘universal brotherhood.’ Charles Lichtman, the Order’s General Secretary at various points in its first 20 years, explained this principle in clear terms. ‘The object we are working for,’ he wrote in 1887, ‘is to embrace all toilers, whether hand or brain, into one vast Brotherhood, and to endeavour to put an end to one trade fighting against another.’

Terence Powderly put it even more simply in the same year. ‘The motto of our organization, “An injury to one is the concern of all,”’ he claimed, ‘is worldwide in its application.’ The Knights decorated their assembly halls with symbols that underlined their commitment to brotherhood on an international scale. The globe placed outside the hall while the assembly was in session naturally symbolised ‘the field of our operation’ and signified ‘Universal Organization.’ The Order’s Great Seal, placed on most official documents, centred on a partial map of the world, and the pentagon that surrounded the map symbolised the ‘five races of men,’ one from each continent, who all looked to the Order for guidance.

The idea of universal brotherhood had roots in both America and Europe. Uriah Stephens’s desire to ‘[knit] up into a compact and homogenous amalgamation all the world’s workers in one universal brotherhood’ owed much to his experience of compagnonnage and to the fraternal orders, especially the Freemasons, which shaped his understanding of the roots of solidarity. Stephens felt that the Order’s international mission would succeed when workers everywhere were ‘guided by the same rules, working by the same methods, practicing the same forms for accomplishing the same ends.’ As with Freemasonry and many other fraternal traditions, a kind of non-denominational Protestantism, based on the simple understanding of all men and women as equal in the eyes of God, lay behind the Order’s brand of universal brotherhood.

It also had roots in American political traditions, especially what labour historians now term ‘labor republicanism.’ That tradition emphasised the need for the unity of all producers to defend democratic and republican institutions from the parasitic and monopolistic forces that sought to corrupt and destroy them; like Marxist conceptions of class interest, labor republicanism had

---

79 Brisbane Courier, 5 September 1887.
80 Reynolds’s, 2 October 1887.
82 Weir, Knights Down Under, p. 205.
83 Powderly, Thirty Years of Labour, p. 89.
international implications as well.\textsuperscript{84} The Knights, after all, recognised that the co-operative commonwealth they hoped to build was necessarily a global one. ‘The cooperation of only a limited number of individuals will not result in the triumph of the cooperative principle all over the globe,’ ran the report of the Order’s Co-operative Board to the General Assembly in 1882, ‘it would only improve the condition of those who were participants in the respective enterprises, for a short time.’\textsuperscript{85} Clifton Yearley is right to argue that ‘given the character of the order … it was almost inevitable that its members would want to sally into the international arena.’\textsuperscript{86}

Material interests encouraged the Knights towards that arena too. These were not the narrow interests of the Order’s leaders. The \textit{New York Times} claimed that ‘their only hope … seems to be in conducting a propaganda in new and foreign fields,’ and an English trade unionist insisted that their foreign assemblies existed to ‘feast and fatten men too idle to work,’ but these accusations came in 1889, five years after the first foreign assemblies were launched. They also rest on the questionable assumption that easier ways of making money were not available to Powderly and the General Executive Board.\textsuperscript{87} John Logue’s claim that modern international trade union bodies work mainly to satisfy the desire of the officials who run them for international travel and other privileges does not apply here either, if only, as we will see in later chapters, because leading Knights refused to travel abroad even when foreign Knights begged them to.\textsuperscript{88}

Instead, the Knights were led towards the international arena by their fears about the consequences of mass immigration, which reached unprecedented levels in the 1880s. More than half a million people entered the United States each year on average during that decade, more than twice as many as in the previous decade.\textsuperscript{89} A growing proportion of immigrants also came from outside the traditional sources of immigration, western and northern Europe, coming instead from Asia and southern and eastern Europe, and the immigration question acquired a distinctly racial and ethnic cast. The Knights adopted a series of ambiguous and often contradictory positions on racial questions. Most Knights supported the legislative exclusion of all Asian and particularly Chinese workers from the United States, and many, including Powderly, extended their opprobrium to immigrants from

\textsuperscript{84} Fink, \textit{Workingmen’s Democracy}, pp. 3–5.
\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Proceedings of the GA} (1882), p. 320.
\textsuperscript{86} Yearley, \textit{Britons}, p. 62.
Knights Across the Atlantic

southern and eastern Europe. At the same time many Knights reacted with horror to outrages like the massacre of Chinese by white miners at Rocks Springs, Wyoming, in 1885. Some even formed assemblies of Chinese workers and voted at the General Assembly to admit them as members, and others organised many southern and eastern European immigrants into their assemblies.90

Certainly, the Order as a whole fiercely resisted any identification with the nativist movement, which enjoyed a revival in the 1880s.91 Few Knights called for a blanket ban on immigration as a whole. Most called instead for a ban on Chinese immigration and on contract labour – that is, on workers brought in from overseas already under contract to a specific employer, who in return paid some or all of their travel costs. Employers frequently used contract labour to break strikes or circumvent closed shops at workplaces where unions were strong. Knights’ opposition to this practice was led, as we will see later, by the glassworkers of Local Assembly 300. And while A.T. Lane writes that the Order’s leadership widened the meaning of contract labour ‘to embrace unskilled workers too, and in particular penurious and so-called degraded unskilled workers originating in Southern and Eastern Europe,’ Knights organised these workers anyway.92 They also insisted that they wished to regulate rather than end or curtail immigration. Powderly supplied a preface for a book in 1887 that claimed that ‘there is no know-nothingism in wise adjustment of the supply of labor to the demand,’ and this desire to make immigration manageable rather illegal pervaded the American labour movement of the day.93


We should not, in other words, associate the Knights of Labor with some kind of knee-jerk opposition to all immigrants or cast all the blame on them for later legislative limits on immigration. Regulation, not restrictionism, remained their aim from start to finish, and the Knights adopted two parallel methods to bring that aim to fruition. The first, of course, was through legislation. But to rest there, and to contrast, in the words of Janice Fine and Richard Tichenor, a ‘nativist and restrictionist labor movement’ in the late nineteenth century with ‘an increasingly inclusive and pro-immigration one’ in the late twentieth century, would seriously distort the historical record and leave out the second method adopted by the Knights of Labor.\textsuperscript{94} That method was international action.

Like his American predecessors, Powderly entered into correspondence with the Scottish Lib-Lab MP and miners’ leader Alexander MacDonald, almost as soon as he became Grand Master Workman in 1879. Powderly hoped that this correspondence would lead to a transatlantic alliance that could begin to regulate the flow of migrant workers across the ocean, and he urged the General Assembly in 1880 to ‘do something whereby the benefits of a union between the workingmen of America and Europe may become so plain that a connecting link may be forged, binding them closely together.’\textsuperscript{95} Powderly’s overtures to MacDonald, and then to another miners’ leader, Thomas Burt, in 1885, came to nothing; but he maintained his belief that the Knights should ‘print circulars and documents concerning the status of the workingman here, and scatter them among our brethren in foreign lands.’\textsuperscript{96} Other American Knights also saw the value of recruiting what were, in effect, anti-emigration agents abroad. J.F. Duncan, a Knight from Detroit, advised the Aberdeen Trades Council in 1886 to ‘organize an assembly of knights of labour’ so that masons from that city would not arrive in the United States and undercut wages and break strikes there.\textsuperscript{97}

Knights also synthesized their desire to regulate immigration with their commitment to universal brotherhood, in what I have termed elsewhere ‘brotherhood from a distance.’\textsuperscript{98} That synthesis resembled very closely the goals of the British trade unionists who created and participated in the First International. In the short term, the Knights wished to regulate immigration

\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Proceedings of the GA} (1880), p. 175.
\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Proceedings of the GA} (1885), p. 18.
\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Aberdeen Weekly Journal}, 13 May 1886.
through international action; in the longer term, they aimed to organise would-be immigrants in their home countries so that they could improve them, remove the material incentives behind migration in the process and ultimately extend the cooperative commonwealth all round the world. Charles Litchman expressed this logic in material terms in 1888. ‘When the Knights of Labor and kindred organizations shall have obtained in foreign lands the same commanding position and influence enjoyed in the United States,’ he wrote, ‘the inequality of wages will disappear, not by levelling our wages down but by levelling their wages up.’ 99 Powderly provided probably the most cogent explanation of this synthesis in the same year. In the Order’s overseas assemblies, he wrote:

The members are to be taught to reform existing abuses at home, so that emigration for the purpose of bettering their lot will not be necessary; they are to be taught that the right to enjoy life in the land of his birth is inherent in man. … To assist foreigners to improve their condition at home, it is not necessary to reduce our own people to a condition bordering on serfdom by loading us down with a helpless surplus population which can at best be used only to the advantage of monopoly.100

In this way Powderly reconciled universal brotherhood with material self-interest. The international expansion of the Knights of Labor would protect American labour and extend help to labour overseas at the same time.

The Order’s first assembly in the Old World was the result of more mundane considerations than Powderly’s lofty synthesis. An organiser, John Hughes, set up LA2886 in Cardiff during a visit to relatives in Wales.101 The Cardiff assembly does not seem to have lasted very long or played any role in the subsequent history of the Order in Britain and Ireland. In the following year, however, other Knights, the glassworkers of Local Assembly 300, Window Glass Workers of America, placed that history on a solid foundation. LA300 was a unique branch of the Order with a misleading name. The assembly was based in Pittsburgh but organised skilled window glassworkers across the United States. According to Pearce Davis, it became ‘the most powerful labor organization in the history of the United States.’ The New York Times described its members as ‘the very princes of the labor world.’102

99 Wichita Daily Eagle, 13 September 1888.
101 Frederick Turner to Powderly, 11 October 1883, Box 8, TVP.
It is easy to see why. LA300’s members enjoyed an unbroken vacation through July and August, when the summer temperatures made glassblowing unsafe. They organised more than nine-tenths of eligible workers in the trade. They successfully maintained strict control over the proportion of apprentices to artisans in order to control the supply of skilled labour. They even managed to delay the introduction of new labour-saving methods into American window glass production.103 Their average weekly wages approached the princely sum of $50.104 Thanks to high weekly contributions and initiation fees, the assembly as a whole possessed enormous monetary reserves, with cash and stocks worth more than $100,000 in 1889.105 For an order devoted to universal brotherhood and whose leaders regularly attacked craft prejudice, it is rather ironic that LA300, the very model of an exclusive (and successful) craft union, should have propelled the Knights of Labor across the Atlantic.

For that is exactly what the assembly did. The window glassworkers may have wrested control of the labour market from employers to a degree unthinkable elsewhere in the United States. But they remained vulnerable to developments in Europe. The widespread application of new machines and techniques there made European glass more competitive vis-à-vis American-made glass. These innovations also left many European glassworkers unemployed and desperate for work, and they became a potential source of recruitment for American employers who wished to use them to break strikes or start non-union glassworks outside the control and restrictions that LA300 imposed on the industry.106 The assembly sent two representatives, James Michels and John Fetters, to Europe in 1880 ‘for the purpose of making an investigation into the condition of the window glass workers in Europe and, if possible … have the European workers form a union and establish closer communication between America and the old country, in order to protect the interest of all the window glass workers.’107 Michels and Fetters returned without forming any unions and, in 1883, LA300 faced a series of prolonged strikes and lockouts as employers attempted to break their stranglehold over the window glass industry. They did so in part using European glassworkers, brought over already under contract. LA300 won these battles, with some assistance from the Order’s General Executive

104 *New York Times*, 18 November 1889.
Board, largely because they had the money to organise or send back the Europeans imported to replace them.  

The assembly emerged in 1884 stronger than ever. For the next decade it established a unique ‘double monopoly’ with the American Window Glass Manufacturing Association whereby the assembly controlled the supply of skilled labour and employers collectively controlled the price and supply of window glass. Yet the threat posed by imported glassworkers to the assembly’s control of the labour market remained. LA300’s leaders met that threat in two ways. First, they lobbied Congress to pass a contract-labour law, drafted by their lawyers in 1883, making the importation of workers already under contract illegal. They conscripted the Knights of Labor at large to support their proposed bill, and thanks to this support the bill became law in 1885 as the Foran Act. Second, they returned to the course first charted by Michels and Fetters. F.M. Gessner, the assembly’s secretary, opined at a meeting in 1884 that ‘the question of foreign competition must be solved either by lower wages at home, or advanced wages and better organization abroad.’ He added that ‘from a business view, it is cheaper for us to organize the window glass workers’ of Europe than it is to engage annually in $60,000 lockouts to resist a reduction of wages that at best only shifts, but does not finally, nor even satisfactorily settle the question of foreign competition.’ Gessner asked the assembly to choose between ‘temporary make-shifts, called strikes,’ or ‘a permanent cure by organization abroad.’

LA300 chose the latter. At the end of April 1884, the assembly sent Isaac Cline and Andrew Burtt, its president and secretary, to Europe. They went, as Burtt wrote to Powderly, ‘to endeavour to perfect the organization of Window Glass Workers on that side of the ocean.’ After several months of agitation throughout the Continent they met at Charleroi, in Belgium, with representative glassworkers from there, Britain, France and Italy, and created the Universal Federation of Window-Glass Workers. Cline became the first president of what John Swinton’s Paper hailed as ‘A World-Wide Union.’ Several days later the first convention of the Universal Federation took place at St Helens, home of Pilkington’s, the world’s largest glassworks.

---

108 Ware, Labor Movement, p. 197.
110 Ware, Labor Movement, pp. 196–97.
111 ‘Report of the Secretary of LA300,’ undated 1884, Box 12, TVP.
112 Andrew Burtt to Powderly, 21 April 1884, Box 10, TVP.
113 John Swinton’s Paper, 15 June 1884.
114 ‘Fifth National Convention of Window-Glass Workers,’ pp. 20–21; Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 315.
The Federation almost ended before it began, however. Delegates to its first convention adopted a constitution that allowed any member of the Federation to work in any other country upon the presentation of a clearance card. LA300 refused to accept that provision and approved changes that made it almost impossible for members of the Federation to move between different countries at all. ‘That change,’ according to an account several years later, ‘came very near to breaking up the Federation.’\(^{115}\) The international solidarity of American window glassworkers had very definite limits. The Universal Federation of Window-Glass Workers, as we will see in later chapters, existed only so long as it tightly regulated the flow of glassworkers from Europe to the United States. But LA300 decided to strike a conciliatory note and at its convention on 8 June 1884, the assembly resolved to send another representative to Europe to continue its work. Cline and Burtt selected A.G. Denny for the task.

In April 1884, when Burtt was about to leave for Europe to organise the glassworkers there, he wrote to Powderly ‘as to the advisability of attaching them to the K of L, actively forming a nucleus from which an organization of all branches of labor under this head may be developed.’\(^{116}\) Burtt and Cline made no moves in this regard. When Denny followed them in September, however, he went with the authority and financial assistance of the Order’s General Executive Board as well as LA300.\(^{117}\) He also kept in regular touch with the General Master Workman. When Denny asked Powderly for advice about adapting the Order’s programme to British conditions, Powderly insisted that ‘our cause must be attuned here and there in order to conform to existing circumstances,’ and told Denny that ‘you are on the ground and know best what to do.’\(^{118}\)

Armed with this knowledge, Denny agitated among glassworkers in various parts of England and in November 1884, his agitation came to a successful conclusion with the creation of Local Assembly 3504. Built on lines identical to LA300, this new assembly had its headquarters in Sunderland and maintained four branches, called ‘preceptories’ as in the United States, at the four main English centres of window glass production: Pilkington’s at St Helens; William Stock and Co. at Plank Lane, near St Helens; Chance Bros at Spon Lane in Smethwick; and Hartleys of Sunderland.\(^{119}\) LA3504 duly appeared in the roll call of new assemblies in the *Journal of United Labor* in January 1885. When Powderly appeared and


\(^{116}\) Burtt to Powderly, 21 April 1884, Box 10, TVP.

\(^{117}\) *Proceedings of the GA* (1885), p. 55.

\(^{118}\) Powderly to AG Denny, 18 November 1884, Box 94, TVP.

\(^{119}\) Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 315.
spoke at a meeting of LA300 in April, its officials could proudly point to the Order’s first major foothold in Britain.\footnote{JUL, 10 January 1885; ‘Minutes of LA300 Meeting,’ 17 April 1885, Box 13, TVP.}

**Conclusion:**

**Exceptionalism and the Rise of the British and Irish Knights of Labor**

In 1882 Robert Layton, the General Secretary of the Knights of Labor and the editor of its official organ, the *Journal of United Labor*, was alerted to a report of the meeting of the Staffordshire potters at Hanley by one of the *Journal*’s readers. Layton was moved to write an article under the suggestive heading ‘Can We Organize in England?’ He answered in the affirmative. At the last General Assembly, Layton wrote, he ‘did not then feel bold enough to assert that in Europe there was fast coming to the surface a strong feeling for organization into the Knights of Labor.’ After the potters based their National Order on the Knights, and from a few ‘indirect’ sources of his own, Layton predicted that ‘in a few years all Europe will be embraced within our folds.’\footnote{JUL, November 1882.}

The Knights made many grandiloquent predictions regarding their order’s glorious future. Like all of these, Layton’s never came to pass. But two years later the Knights opened their first assemblies in the Old World. They were able to do so because of a unique set of historical conditions that opened up during the 1880s and closed again soon afterwards. In that decade the American labour movement seemed to have shed its earlier backwardness and even, through the Knights of Labor, seemed more attuned to the problems of contemporary industrial society than the British trade unions. The Knights, despite their superficial resemblance to Robert Owen’s Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, were the product of sweeping social and economic changes taking place on both sides of the Atlantic, from the threat posed by mechanisation to skilled labour, to the rise of monopoly capitalism. By contrast, the British labour movement remained stagnant for most of the 1880s. Its critics found in the Knights, and in radical Americans like Henry George, Edward Bellamy and Laurence Gronlund, the answers to pressing questions at home. During this unique decade, in other words, British and Irish workers became unusually receptive to ideas and institutions from the United States.

American workers were also unusually willing and able during the 1880s to export their own movement abroad. Following the basic pattern of working-class internationalism in Europe and North America over most of the nineteenth century, the Knights of Labor were guided by a concept of
international solidarity – universal brotherhood. Like their predecessors in the First International and other international working-class associations, American Knights were also guided by their own material interests, in particular their desire to regulate immigration to the United States in order to protect the American labour movement and American standards of living. They reconciled their principles and interests on the grounds that by extending their order abroad they would protect the American labour movement while simultaneously helping to improve conditions for workers abroad. In the process they might even chip away at the material causes that led to mass immigration in the first place. Thanks to the window glassworkers of LA300, the Order actually began to put that synthesis into practice. Their Universal Federation, however much it was actually designed to keep foreign glassworkers out of the American labour market, brought organisation, financial assistance and other advantages to its European affiliates. Indeed, thanks to the window glassworkers of LA300, the Order established LA3504, its first lasting assembly in Britain and Ireland.

Virtually all of the elements of this story call the foundations of American exceptionalism into question. In the mid-1880s the American labour movement was far from weak. American Knights of Labor then outnumbered the British workers affiliated with the TUC. Nor was that movement backward. British radicals of the time looked to Americans like Henry George and Laurence Gronlund for the latest political doctrines, when they were not imbibing socialist and anarchist ideas from continental Europe. The Knights of Labor also fit comfortably into wider patterns of working-class internationalism, on both sides of the Atlantic, during the nineteenth century. Indeed, during the 1880s the classic picture of American exceptionalism was almost completely upended. In chapters 5 and 6 we will explore the consequences of that upending for American and British labour history.

In 1885, Robert Layton evidently thought himself sufficiently vindicated by the Order’s expansion abroad to return to his earlier role as seer and prophet. ‘Our name has become a household word in all parts of the world, and the day is not far distant when our banner will be planted in every civilized community,’ he told that year’s General Assembly. ‘During the past year the Order has been firmly planted in England and Belgium, and before the next General Assembly meets I believe the principles of our Order will be inculcated in all the principal cities of those two countries.’ 122 The next chapter gauges the extent to which Layton’s prophecy came to pass across Britain and Ireland.