On 5 May 1886, a crowded meeting of workers from various trades, from chain, anvil, tube, nut, bolt and vice makers to coal miners and ironworkers, met at the Boot and Slipper Inn in Smethwick, near Birmingham. The purpose of this meeting, as a newspaper report put it, was to consider ‘a system of federation for all trades societies, or the advisability of joining the Knights of Labour in America.’ The Reverend T.T. Sherlock opened with several introductory remarks. ‘The object of the movement was to secure for the labourer his full hire,’ he told the meeting. ‘It was not pillage and confiscation but simple justice that they wanted.’ The assembled workers began to applaud. As they did so two of the timber beams supporting the floor gave way with a crash. The applause was replaced by a surging mass of people who rushed the speaker’s platform to escape from the collapsing scenery around them. No one, in the end, was injured or killed. The meeting reconvened in the open air, and Richard Juggins, one of the Black Country’s most respected trade unionists, urged his listeners to ‘follow the action of the Knights of Labour in America.’ They did not, or they did so in their own way. Juggins led the creation of the Midland Counties Trades Federation, an association of small trades around Birmingham and the Black Country that features in later chapters.

This was an inauspicious event for a movement that expected, as Robert Layton put it, to establish itself in every town and city in Britain within a matter of years. Yet it was hardly fatal. Knights had established LA2886 at Cardiff in 1883, LA3504 in 1884, and in the following year an assembly of dock labourers at Liverpool, which included the future Labour MP James Sexton, began, grew and then launched a disastrous, failed strike that brought the assembly to an end. In 1886, Robert Robertson and Charles Bird, two organisers with LA3504’s Spon Lane preceptory, began to proselytise for

1 *Birmingham Daily Post*, 6 May 1886.
the Order among local workers outside the glass trade. They were, ironically enough, initially constrained by a circular sent from the Order’s General Secretary, which ordered all organisers to cease opening new assemblies for a period of 40 days. Leading Knights sent that circular to slow down their order’s phenomenal growth, which they feared would result in new Knights leading a rash of strikes that they did not desire or have the money to wage successfully. At few other times in American labour history have trade union leaders so energetically prevented willing recruits from joining their movement.

Once Robertson received permission from Terence Powderly to ignore the circular, and received advice that ‘in future when a document is sent to you from the general office you are to take the circumstances into account and be guided accordingly,’ he and Bird commenced their agitation in earnest. They attended a number of meetings like the one at the Boot and Slipper Inn during April and May, and Bird ended one of them with the promise ‘that he had authority to initiate any body of men over 10, as members of the Knights of Labour.’ They also made their case at the Smethwick Salvation Army Barracks. A number of workers at Messrs Tangye’s works in that suburb, a major producer of pumps and engines, soon invited them ‘to a mug of ale and a chat,’ as the Birmingham Daily Gazette later recalled, at the Boot and Slipper Inn. This time the floor remained intact. On 12 June 1886, Bird and Robertson took 13 workers from Smethwick and West Bromwich through the Founding Ceremony of the first long-lived assembly outside the glass trade, LA7952, and 50 more paid their initiation fee by instalments. The Knights, as the Gazette added, ‘became the topic of the day at other factories, Messrs Tangye’s men were continually invited to send the Organiser to such and such a workshop, and so the leaven spread.’ ‘For now the stone has started to roll,’ Robert Robertson wrote to Powderly, ‘no knowing where it will go on to.’

And so, nearly two years after A.G. Denny opened LA3504, the Knights of Labor began their quest to extend their order into all corners, and all trades and industries, of Britain and Ireland. This chapter explores how successful they were in that quest. It moves from conditions at a local level to events across the Atlantic, from the state of trade unionism in Birmingham to the strikes and political campaigns of the American Great

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2 Robert Robertson to Powderly, 22 March 1886, Box 19, TVP; Powderly to Robert Robertson, 6 April 1886, Box 95, TVP.

3 For Knights at these meetings see Labour Tribune, 1 and 8 May 1886; for Bird, see Smethwick Telephone, 29 May 1886.

4 Birmingham Daily Gazette, 18 February 1889.

5 Robert Robertson to Powderly, 15 June 1886, Box 22, TVP.
Upheaval, and from the financial and human assistance that American Knights provided to those in Britain and Ireland to the ramifications of Irish and Catholic migration for the Order’s prospects across the Atlantic. It ends with questions of race and empire, two interrelated themes that permeate the history of the British, Irish and American labour movements. Before we approach these themes, however, we first provide a brief chronology of the British and Irish assemblies.

The Knights were present for the longest period and in the greatest numbers in the area around Birmingham and the Black Country. In July 1887, a year after LA7952 opened its doors with 13 members, the assembly boasted 250. Eight other local assemblies now existed alongside it, all of them under the first district assembly (DA) in Britain and Ireland, DA208, based in Handsworth. Together they numbered nearly 800 members. Only four months later that number had swelled to 18 assemblies with around 2,000 members. A second district assembly, DA248 based in Cradley Heath, soon followed the first and between January and April 1888 the official membership figures for the two district assemblies rose from 2,382 to 3,184, in around 30 assemblies. Some reports placed this membership as high as 6,000. In February 1889, according to an expose in the Birmingham Daily Gazette, local assemblies ranged from 200 or less to nearly 900 members, and the newspaper estimated that around 7,000 Knights belonged to the two district assemblies. Charles Chamberlain, an organiser for LA7952, claimed that this estimation was far too low, and that ‘the list of Assemblies that was published corresponded to the one printed about twelve months ago … Since that time we have more than doubled the number of our Assemblies.’ Chamberlain’s estimate was probably too high. But Thomas Dean, the Master Workman of DA208, claimed in May 1889 that the Knights in Britain numbered 10,000 members in 50 assemblies. That number seems warranted given that LA3054 alone organised more than 1,000 glassworkers at its various preceptories in 1886.

The vast majority of Knights in May 1889 belonged to assemblies in Birmingham and the Black Country; but not all. The second major centre of the Order in Britain and Ireland was Rotherham, in South Yorkshire. Knights established LA1266 there in June 1888, particularly amongst local
stove-grate workers, and boasted two branches in the town in August 1889.\textsuperscript{14} These assemblies were joined in the next year by three more in Rotherham itself, five others in the Sheffield and Rotherham area, and then by assemblies at Hoyland Nether and Platts Common, near Barnsley. All of them came together under DA256.\textsuperscript{15} Assemblies at Derby and at Stanningley, near Leeds, operated at opposite fringes of the district. In 1888 the Knights also returned to Liverpool. LA647, composed of tinners, originally affiliated with DA208 but applied in 1890 to remain attached to the General Assembly; aside from this they remain outside the documentary record.\textsuperscript{16} LA443 of Bootle did not. The assembly, based mainly but not exclusively on dock labourers, opened in May 1889.\textsuperscript{17} Three months later the assembly boasted 250 members, and in early 1890 Knights in Bootle opened five new preceptories around Liverpool, planning to turn them in time into separate assemblies; however, for reasons we will explore later, LA443 soon fell into terminal decline and disappeared either at the end of 1890 or the following year.\textsuperscript{18} Elsewhere in England, workers in Preston briefly formed their own assemblies in 1887 and styled themselves the ‘K of L of Great Britain.’ Preston’s Knights quickly departed from the historical record, however.\textsuperscript{19}

The Knights were never confined to England. Their first assembly in Britain and Ireland was based, after all, in Wales. But the historical record is silent on the subsequent activities of LA2886 after 1883, and it took six years for the next non-English assemblies to appear. The first assembly opened in Glasgow in July 1889. By October the city boasted seven, and a Scottish correspondent to the \textit{Labour Tribune} noted that ‘this looks like business.’\textsuperscript{20} According to a telegram received by LA443 in December, the Scottish assemblies at that time boasted 3,000 members, 1,000 of them having joined in the previous month.\textsuperscript{21} These assemblies came together under DA203 of Glasgow. At the same time, the Order also arrived in Ireland. In 1888 and 1889 two assemblies appeared in Belfast, LA418 representing bootmakers and shipyard workers, and LA1566 representing ropemakers. LA418 reached a membership of around 300 and LA1566 achieved similar numbers.\textsuperscript{22} LA1601 in Derry joined them in 1889, and in March 1891 claimed around

\textsuperscript{14} Rotherham Advertiser, 31 August 1889.
\textsuperscript{15} Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 331.
\textsuperscript{17} Bootle Times, 1 June 1889.
\textsuperscript{18} Bean, ‘Knights in Liverpool,’ p. 73.
\textsuperscript{19} David Whittle to Powderly, 13 April 1887, Box 32, TVP.
\textsuperscript{20} Labour Tribune, 12 October 1889.
\textsuperscript{21} Halfpenny Weekly, 14 December 1889.
\textsuperscript{22} Boyle, \textit{Irish Labour Movement}, pp. 104–06.
By that time the Belfast assemblies had collapsed, and the one in Derry faced serious and ultimately insurmountable problems. The Scottish assemblies also seem to have folded sometime in mid-1890 or 1891. The end of 1889 marked the high point of the British and Irish assemblies. They extended the farthest around those countries and reached their peak total membership at that time. It is impossible to calculate accurately exactly what that membership was. In January 1890, one Knight provided the absurd figure of 200,000 throughout Britain and Ireland as part of a worldwide membership of 6 million; in May 1890, a Knight at Platts Common claimed that there were 18,000 Knights in Birmingham and the Black Country alone.

Thomas Dean’s figure of 10,000 in total seems more accurate, and with the additional assemblies in Scotland and Ireland, not to mention the rapid growth of assemblies at Rotherham and Walsall, we might place the peak membership of the Order in Britain and Ireland between 10,000 and 15,000 in the early months of 1890.

This membership soon fell in dramatic fashion, for reasons we explore in later chapters. In August, 1891, Arthur Nadin of LA1266 claimed 5,000 members in England; in July of the same year, however, the Smethwick Weekly News claimed that DA208 numbered around 400, DA248 slightly more and DA256 rather less. The latter figure seems closer to the mark, for the last two district assemblies came together in the British National Assembly in 1891, and when they entered their first return to the Registrar of Trade Unions and Friendly Societies, they had only 434 members between them. DA208, which remained outside the National Assembly, was reduced to four local assemblies in February 1893 and only continued to decline afterwards.

The end of that year marked the point when, to all intents and purposes, the Knights of Labor no longer existed in Britain and Ireland. But the full story of that decline is reserved for later chapters; we return instead to the task of explaining the Order’s growth from its first non-glass assembly to the end of the 1880s.

23 McAteer, ‘New Unionism in Derry,’ p. 13. Several months later this figure stood at 700 (JUL, 30 July 1891).
24 Liverpool Echo, 28 January 1890; Sheffield and Rotherham Independent, 21 May 1890.
25 Rotherham Advertiser, 29 August 1891; Smethwick Weekly News, 11 July 1891. DA248, at least, claimed 1,000 members when they attended the Labour Electoral Congress in 1890 (Labour Electoral Association, Report of the Labour Electoral Congress (Manchester, 1890), p. 2).
27 Thomas Dean to Powderly, 8 February 1893, Box 77, TVP.
Disorganisation and the Great Upheaval

The early history of the British Knights was determined by the location of the four glassworks where LA3504 set up its preceptories, at Plank Lane, St Helens, Sunderland and Spon Lane. The first two, in Lancashire, were close together and potentially afforded an excellent base to recruit workers in the major industrial regions of the county. The assembly of dockers that James Sexton joined in Liverpool came about through the efforts of a visiting organiser who, Henry Pelling surmises, was likely on his way to or from one of these preceptories. But the Plank Lane preceptory remained small and soon fell into disrepair and, as we will see in Chapter 4, the glassworkers at St Helens struggled to make any headway against their employer, Pilkington’s. The Lancashire preceptories were in no shape to spawn assemblies in other trades. Glassworkers in Sunderland found that the strong and rather parochial local labour movement that surrounded them did not permit the Knights to organise new assemblies, and still maintain friendly relations with other unions. ‘As to the efforts for organisation we have done our best,’ James Brown, the secretary of LA3504, later told General Secretary-Treasurer Hayes, ‘but in the north of England they are all large trade organisations, the Boilermakers, Engineers, Shipwrights, National Labourers Union and Cetra and believe in their own principles and customs.’

That left the preceptory at Spon Lane, near Birmingham. In the previous chapter we saw how the British labour movement, despite its pre-eminence amongst the trade union movements of the world, still organised only a small fraction of wage earners. That was particularly true in Birmingham and the Black Country, the area to the west of the city, which became one of the great industrial areas of Britain during the nineteenth century. Trade unions there remained weak even if, as John Benson argues, that difference was not as severe as historians have often claimed. That weakness was partly conditioned by the characteristics of industrial development in the region. During the second half of the nineteenth century the iron and steel industries of the Black Country went into relative decline, and production remained concentrated to a greater degree than elsewhere in small units, often based in the family home and using outdated and

28 Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 320.
29 Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 319.
30 James Brown to Hayes, 31 August 1892, Box 10, JHP.
inefficient equipment. The chain makers – men, women and children, working in factories or in family workshops, and everywhere in abject poverty – became human symbols of that decline. *Commonweal* described them as the ‘poorest paid slaves in the country.’ Not all Black Country workers were so poorly organised but their unions nevertheless remained weaker, and their employers more paternalistic, than in other major British industrial centres.

This disorganisation provided space for the Knights to grow, as T.R. Threlfall, a leading figure in the TUC, explained in 1894. ‘It is a significant fact,’ he wrote, ‘that the society seemed to flourish best in those portions of the Black Country where trades unionism is weak.’ In 1886 there were movements afoot to end this weakness. ‘Several orders of skilled workmen were casting about for a newer style of Trade Unionism,’ as the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* later recalled, and ‘artisans were ready for any organiser at that time.’ The meetings they held in April and May to create a federation for the district underlined this desire. They ended in the creation of the Midland Counties Trades Federation, a body that appears at greater length in Chapter 6, but some workers also gravitated towards Robert Robertson and Charles Bird as they attended the meetings, agitated at the Salvation Army Barracks and raised the Order’s profile outside the premises of the Chance Bros Glass Works. That profile was raised most spectacularly due to events from abroad. The disorganisation of workers in Birmingham and the Black Country, and their attempts to remedy it, were contemporary to the struggles which collectively became known as the Great Upheaval, in which American Knights played a leading role.

In 1886, American workers engaged in 1,411 recorded strikes at 9,891 establishments with 499,489 participants, more than double the number of strikers in the previous year and far higher than the 129,521 strikers recorded in 1881. American workers also engaged in boycotts and in a rash of unofficial, and thus unrecorded, strikes as well. Many of these struggles took place under the banner of the Knights of Labor, which nearly reached a million members in mid-1886. American workers also entered the political arena as an independent force in unprecedented numbers. They nearly

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33 *Commonweal*, 26 February 1887.

34 *Manchester Times*, 26 January 1894.

35 *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 18 February 1889.

elected Henry George as the Mayor of New York, and dozens of local labour
parties sprang up in virtually every state, some of which won local elections.
Anarchists and socialists held demonstrations throughout the United States.
During one of them, at Haymarket Square in Chicago in May 1886, a bomb
exploded among the police. A number of anarchists were charged with
murder, on flimsy evidence, and some were sentenced to death. Middle- and
upper-class Americans could be forgiven for thinking that they would soon
face open and armed insurrection as well.

Most British newspapers reported on the Great Upheaval with an equal
measure of fear and contempt. The Times hoped that Americans would
put an end to this ‘fooling with anarchy,’ and hoped ‘that our American
kinsfolk will concede to us the right of putting an end summarily to
any similar “fooling with anarchy” among the subjects of the British
Crown.’ Reports that the Knights planned to open assemblies in Britain
raised similar fears, even though trade unionists assured the London
Morning Post that this remained ‘a doubtful matter.’ The Yorkshire Gazette
exclaimed that ‘British industries are threatened with dire revolution!’
The Halfpenny Weekly later described the probable reaction to news of
British assemblies in Liberal circles: ‘a succession of huge strikes, resulting
in the loss of our foreign trade, and labour candidates “splitting up the
Liberal vote.”’ British observers looked across the Atlantic and saw a
level of violence and social conflict that far exceeded anything at home.
Most were unaware that Terence Powderly and other leading Knights
were desperately trying to dissociate their Order from that violence, and
they feared that assemblies in Britain would bring the Great Upheaval
with them.

Those fears informed the coverage local newspapers gave to the British
and Irish assemblies. Some of them, notably Reynolds’s, the Halfpenny Weekly
and the Smethwick Telephone, reported the Knights in a sympathetic way that
reflected the liberal-radical views of their writers and editors. Others paid
little attention to the Knights or simply reprinted articles on them from
other publications. Most local newspapers did their best, however, to expose
the Order as something alien and destructive. Subsequent chapters feature
attacks on the assemblies from the Smethwick Weekly News, the Birmingham
Daily Gazette and other papers determined to prevent them from exporting
the Great Upheaval across the Atlantic.

37 The Times, 13 October 1886.
38 Morning Post, 28 September 1886.
39 Yorkshire Gazette, 2 October 1886.
40 Halfpenny Weekly, 9 June 1888.
41 Laslett, ‘Haymarket, Henry George,’ pp. 68–82.
Workers in Birmingham and the Black Country, on the other hand, saw the Knights and the Upheaval in a rather different light. At the same meeting where the floor collapsed, in May 1886, the Rev. Sherlock described the presence of the Order’s representatives as a ‘pleasing feature,’ and added that ‘it was a splendid augury for the future when they had men to come right across the Atlantic to discuss what was the best means to carry on their trade organisations to a successful issue.’\(^{42}\) Under the appropriate heading, ‘Movement Among the Dry Bones,’ one worker from Cradley told the *Labour Tribune* in September that:

> the working men of England could not do better than join the Knights of Labour … Their programme, which I have before me as I write, seems to answer most of the requirements of the working-men, and there is some backbone in that society – something a man feels he can lean on in case of necessity.\(^{43}\)

Where many newspapers saw the Knights as harbingers of anarchy and violence, enough workers in Birmingham and the Black Country hailed them as a solution to their disorganisation.

A number of newspapers, from radical sheets like *Reynolds’s* and *Commonweal* to mainstream journals in Birmingham, received inquiries from correspondents who wanted more information about the Order.\(^{44}\) In April 1886, *Commonweal* printed the address of the Order’s General Secretary, Frederick Turner, and directed future queries about the Knights to him.\(^{45}\) In the correspondence pages of the *Labour Tribune* and other newspapers aimed at a working-class readership, workers in both Britain and America debated the merits of attaching themselves to the Knights from 1886 onwards.\(^{46}\) The most notable inquiry, however, came in February 1886 from *Commonweal’s* American correspondent, H. Halliday Sparling, to the prominent American labour journal, *John Swinton’s Paper*. ‘I am continually being asked if there is a Lodge of the Knights of Labor in London,’ Sparling wrote, ‘and it makes me feel tired to keep on saying “No,” or, “I wish there were.” Is there no way of starting a Lodge, so as to show our British Trade Unionists how to combine?’\(^{47}\) Swinton replied in the next issue. English soil, he claimed, was ‘well prepared’ for the Knights, for ‘millions have been trained in trades unionism, and far broader ideas

\(^{42}\) Smethwick Telephone, 8 May 1886.

\(^{43}\) Labour Tribune, 4 September 1886.

\(^{44}\) Commonweal, April 1886 and 17 September 1887; Reynolds, 21 August 1887, 15 and 29 July 1888; Birmingham Daily Post, 15 May 1888; Birmingham Daily Gazette, 9 July 1889.

\(^{45}\) Commonweal, April 1886.

\(^{46}\) See for instance, the Labour Tribune, 16 October and 20 November 1886; 1 January 1887.

\(^{47}\) John Swinton’s Paper, 28 February 1886.
than those of the Trade Unions are now leavening the democratic masses of England.' Swinton advised Sparling to contact Terence Powderly directly, and ended with an appeal for 'the Order [to] march to conquest in Great Britain and Ireland.'

Others also greeted Sparling’s letter with enthusiasm. George Schilling, a socialist and leading Knight from Chicago, argued in Swinton’s paper that:

[It is] only through a powerful labor organization like the K. of L., having its ramifications in every civilized country of the world, that national bigotry, vanity and the false hatred of the workers of one country toward their fellow-workmen of other countries, can be destroyed, and in its stead spring up that feeling of international fraternity among all producers, from which will yet be born the Universal Republic of Labor.

Schilling then suggested that ‘in order to supply the want of our British fellow-workers, I move that MICHAEL DAVITT be called upon to accept a commission as Organizer of the K. of L. on the other side of the Atlantic, and espouse the cause of our Holy Order.’ Readers from Brooklyn, Newark, Providence and De Soto, Missouri, seconded Schilling’s motion in the next issue of John Swinton’s Paper. Two years later, as we will soon see, Schilling’s motion was enacted.

Yet the Knights never opened any assemblies in London. Sparling was no admirer of Powderly, as his American column in Commonweal made clear, and he probably wrote to Swinton to avoid contacting the General Master Workman directly. His exchange with Swinton ultimately led nowhere. Powderly commissioned an organiser, one James Russell Walker of Notting Hill, in December 1886. Another Londoner, William Beck, asked Powderly in 1887 for advice on starting assemblies in the city. Neither Walker nor Beck met with any success. Jewish anarchists in London’s East End did briefly organise a group called the Knights of Labor in 1888. They aimed, as William Fishman writes, ‘to reverse the tide which had been removing the most gifted of their comrades to America.’ Yet no further references to that group have survived.

48 John Swinton’s Paper, 28 February 1886. Swinton could speak from personal experience, having recently visited Europe and met such luminaries of the contemporary political scene as Victor Hugo and Karl Marx over the course of his travels. See J. Swinton, John Swinton’s Travels (New York, 1880), pp. 18–21, 41–45.
49 John Swinton’s Paper, 7 March 1886.
50 John Swinton’s Paper, 14 March 1886.
51 ‘List of Organizers, 1886–1888,’ Reel 68, Terence V. Powderly Personal Papers Microfilm Collection, Library of Congress; Powderly to William Beck, July 22 1887, Box 97, TVP.
The Knights, as Henry Pelling observed, remained ‘completely unsuccessful’ in London. The assemblies around Birmingham relied on disorganisation, existing agitation among local workers and pre-existing assemblies to speed their growth; some Londoners showed interest in the Knights but not, evidently, with the same combination of favourable conditions and not with the same results. The assemblies that appeared towards the end of the 1880s largely followed the Birmingham example. When LA454 began in Walsall in 1888, Knights encountered the same diverse and small-scale industrial patterns as in the rest of the Black Country. Known as ‘The Town of a Hundred Trades,’ workers in Walsall’s varied crafts and trades saw the Knights as a powerful ally in their own struggles. Disorganised stove-grate workers in Rotherham speeded the growth of LA1266 and other assemblies in the town. LA443 in Bootle emerged in the context of widespread agitation among local tramwaymen and seamen and then among the assembly’s main constituency, local dock labourers, who also saw American Knights as powerful allies against the transatlantic shipping companies. The assemblies in Glasgow, Derry and Belfast also followed a similar pattern. Disorganisation and pre-existing agitation in each local setting combined with the idea that the Knights of Labor could solve their problems.

The Order’s expansion around Britain and Ireland, and the consolidation and growth of its existing assemblies, also depended on a small but very enthusiastic cadre of leaders and organisers. Without the efforts of Robert Robertson and Charles Bird, the Spon Lane preceptory might never have spawned the assemblies that emerged around it. Richard Hill and Thomas Dean, recording secretary and Master Workman respectively of LA7952 and DA208, remained in those positions from 1886 right through to the end of those assemblies in 1894. Dean’s speeches in Liverpool and Rotherham began and speeded the growth of assemblies there, and Hill handled the bureaucratic side of the Order’s business in the Birmingham area. The Journal of United Labor was even moved to describe Zebulon Butler, a particularly vociferous Knight from Stourbridge, as its ‘English Champion’ for his defence of the Order in the press. Jesse Chapman, a headmaster and the Master Workman of LA10227 in Smethwick, effectively coordinated organising efforts in the wider Birmingham region.

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53 Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 324.
56 Liverpool Mercury, 27 May 1889; Rotherham Advertiser, 21 December 1889.
57 JUL, 26 September 1889.
58 Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 321.
The rise of a Transnational Movement

an organiser attached to DA208, became the public face of the Order in Birmingham and directed the growth of the assemblies there for a time in 1888 and 1889.

LA454 in Walsall and then LA1266 in Rotherham benefited from the oratorical talents of Haydn Sanders, a feature of later chapters.59 LA443 in Bootle, a suburb of Liverpool, secured the leadership of Samuel Reeves, commonly described as the best-known socialist in the city and an effective agitator.60 James Shaw Maxwell, a leading single-taxer in Scotland and prominent in the early Scottish Labour Party and the later Independent Labour Party, led the rapid if short-lived growth of DA203 in Glasgow. For a time, the first socialist member of the House of Commons, the colourful Scottish aristocrat Robert Bontine Cunningham Graham, affiliated himself with the Scottish Knights as well. Ben Turner and James Sexton, both later to become MPs and trade union leaders themselves, served part of their union apprenticeship in early British assemblies.61 As we will see, the British Knights also briefly secured the services of Michael Davitt, the famed Irish nationalist leader. All these leaders feature in subsequent chapters.

They also attracted the sympathy of some influential local figures, particularly in the Black Country. The Rev. Sherlock advanced their cause at those early meetings in 1886. The Rev. Harold Rylett, a Methodist minister based in Dudley until he moved to Manchester in 1889, also proved sympathetic to the Knights.62 Rylett became well known for his advocacy of Black Country chain makers. When John Burnett, the labour correspondent to the Board of Trade, visited the area in 1888, Rylett served as his guide.63 A later biography of Rylett actually placed him as a leader of the Knights in Dudley and other parts of the Black Country.64 And Sherlock and Rylett were not alone. An anonymous ‘Minister of Religion,’ perhaps one of them or a third party, defended the Knights in a letter to the Birmingham Daily Post.65 The Birmingham Daily Gazette declared in 1889 that ‘the Knights of Labour in and around Birmingham have some half-dozen public men – ministers of religion and the like – in their confidence,’ and one of these

62 Smethwick Telephone, 26 October 1889.
63 Birmingham Daily Post, 11 October 1888.
64 Reynolds’s, 16 May 1897.
65 Birmingham Daily Post, 21 May 1888.
anonymous well-wishers conducted an interview with the Gazette on the Order’s behalf.66

The achievements of British and Irish Knights appear even more impressive when we consider the economic conditions that prevailed for most of the 1880s. Between 1877 and 1889, except for a brief upswing in 1882 and 1883, as A.E.P. Duffy writes, ‘the general trade of the country had suffered from constant depression.’ Many unions found their incomes falling while their expenditure on unemployed members increased, and ‘the numbers represented at the TUC were falling sharply.’67 These adverse conditions held back the Order’s growth as well. Richard Hill told the Journal of United Labor in 1887 that ‘our success would have been far greater but for the very indifferent state of trade in this part of our land.’68 Yet the Knights reached 10,000 members just over three years after the first non-glass assembly appeared in the Black Country. Had the Great Upheaval coincided with the upswing in trade and trade unionism that occurred in Britain and Ireland at the end of the decade, their growth might have been even more explosive. But if the British and Irish Knights had a poor sense of timing, they also belonged to an international Order with resources and allies far beyond theirs, and whose leaders made sure that some of these resources and allies were used to speed the growth of assemblies across Britain and Ireland.

The Order as a Transnational Movement

In some ways, the Knights of Labor was destined to become an international and not simply an American order. Knights preached universal brotherhood with enthusiasm. They feared the consequences of uncontrolled immigration for the living standards and democratic rights of American workers. This combination, this brotherhood from a distance, gave them powerful incentives to organise abroad. In other ways, however, the Knights were an unlikely candidate for an international body. Their finances were always a mess. Robert Weir observes that one ‘of history’s frustrating ironies is that those federations that were chronically short of cash – such as the International Working Men’s Association, the Knights of Labor, and the Industrial Workers of the World – were the ones to make the biggest efforts toward global organizing.’69 Enthusiasm has never been a perfect substitute for money, the lubricant needed to pay organisers, support members on

68 JUL, 30 July 1887.
69 Weir, Knights Down Under, p. 240.
strike and keep the bureaucratic wheels in motion. The Knights of Labor had a great deal of the first and a constant shortage of the second, and that always placed severe limits on their assistance to the assemblies that sprang up elsewhere in the world.

That, of course, was not the impression that many workers on both sides of the Atlantic had of the Order’s finances. American workers between 1885 and 1887 assumed that the Knights, with their hundreds of thousands of members, drew on an equally impressive amount of money to back them up. The Order came to be seen as the source of virtually unlimited strike pay. Interested British workers, at a much greater distance, naturally made similar assumptions. The fact that the Knights arrived in Britain through the vehicle of LA300, an incredibly wealthy organisation that actually subsidised the Order at large for most of its history, encouraged those assumptions still further. So did the assistance granted to British Knights by the Order’s General Executive Board. When Black Country assemblies engaged in their first disputes in 1886 and 1887, the Board sent them an unsolicited cheque for $100 and implied that more would follow if necessary.70 Knights in Dudley still drew on this example in 1890 as proof of the benefits that the British assemblies derived from their connection to the United States. However, he claimed that the cheque had been for £200 – a useful symbol of the way that distance, and time, magnified the power and the financial resources of the American Knights in Britain and Ireland.71 The idea of sending membership dues across the Atlantic was not universally popular in Britain and Ireland, and we will deal with financial questions at greater length in Chapter 7; but financial assistance from America attracted workers to the assemblies and provided them with the money needed to organise new ones.

American Knights certainly did what they could to make their British and Irish recruits feel part of an international movement. Despite pressing business and thousands of letters daily from Knights across the United States, Powderly and the other general officers maintained correspondence with their assemblies across the ocean, and usually replied to their letters promptly.72 Powderly could provide little in the way of detailed advice for British and Irish Knights, and many of his suggestions, as we will see in later chapters, would have proved calamitous if followed; but the sheer fact of this correspondence proved to Knights in the Old World that they were not completely isolated from Knights in the New. The Journal of United Labor,

70 *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 18 February 1889. A note for future money figures: the contemporary exchange rate was about 4 US dollars to 1 pound sterling.
71 *Stourbridge, Brierley Hill and County Express*, 1 March 1890.
the Order’s official organ, fulfilled a similar function. Letters from Knights in Britain and Ireland regularly appeared in its pages. Frederick Shreeve, the recording secretary of Derby’s LA395, recognised the Journal’s potential power as a means to weld the Order’s various worldwide assemblies into a kind of imagined community, to use Benedict Anderson’s term, and thus into a real international movement.\textsuperscript{73} Shreeve ‘earnestly ask[ed] some of our brothers in Great Britain to write to the Journal, for I feel convinced that it would cause brother members and others to read it with increased interest and to their own edification. As we are glad to hear good news from our brothers in America, so will they be glad to hear from us.’\textsuperscript{74} The Journal’s editors certainly made great claims for its influence overseas. The doubling of the Order’s English membership in 1888, they wrote, was ‘a direct result of the missionary work carried on by the Journal in the hands of the Local Assemblies in that country.’\textsuperscript{75}

The Order became an international movement without a bureaucracy to match, and in many ways this worked to the benefit of Knights in Britain and Ireland. Even in the United States, as Robert Weir observes, the seemingly clear hierarchical progression from local to district and state assemblies, and finally to the General Assembly and the general officers, became labyrinthine in practice. Local and district assemblies competed for jurisdiction between and within each other. These unclear jurisdictional boundaries encouraged internal conflict and drove many talented and committed members and leaders from the assemblies. The decisions reached at General Assemblies, or arrived at by the general officers, were only implemented when assemblies found it in their interest to do so.\textsuperscript{76} American Knights never had the money, the inclination or the time, however, to replicate this bureaucratic nightmare on an international scale. British and Irish Knights never became entangled in the murky world of the Order’s internal politics. The preoccupations of the general officers with American affairs also ensured that British and Irish Knights enjoyed a large measure of flexibility and independent action.

The only exceptions to this benign neglect, supplemented with occasional assistance, were the glassworkers. Isaac Cline, Andrew Burtt and A.G. Denny invested several months of their time to organise LA3504 as well as the Belgian assemblies and their Universal Federation. They and LA300’s other

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{JUL}, 10 October 1889.
\textsuperscript{75} \textit{JUL}, 24 January 1889.
\textsuperscript{76} Robert Weir, \textit{Knights Unhorsed: Internal Conflict in a Gilded Age Social Movement} (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), esp. ch. 4.
leaders stayed in direct contact with LA3504 throughout that assembly’s existence, and worked with them and other European glassworkers through the Universal Federation. According to a report at LA300’s convention in 1889, the assembly spent $15,000 building up the Federation and a further $1,000 per year to maintain it. Through that Federation a number of English glassworkers were able to find positions in the United States, including Joseph French, the first secretary of LA3504, thanks in part to Powderly’s intercession with James Campbell, the president of LA300. Powderly’s intercession with Campbell also allowed glassworkers at the St Helens preceptory to rid themselves of Joseph Norbury, their secretary, whose alcoholism threatened to undermine the difficult task of organising at the anti-union firm Pilkington Bros. James Campbell, a strong advocate of temperance, initially resisted allowing Norbury to find work in the United States until the General Master Workman convinced him that ‘if this man is not allowed to go to work the people on the other side may begin to think that they are allied to us only for our benefit and not theirs.’ English Knights certainly appreciated Powderly’s help.

Yet British and Irish Knights still felt their isolation from the Order at large. In 1887, Richard Hill wrote a letter to the general officers, read and debated at that year’s General Assembly, which detailed the problems that arose from the distance between British assemblies and headquarters. It took nearly a month for letters to travel to and from the general officers, Hill wrote, and telegraphs were too short and expensive to effectively communicate problems. ‘Besides hampering us in consultation,’ he continued, ‘the intervening distance makes it impossible for any representative from headquarters to come among us in case of trouble to mediate between labor and capital when local effort may prove fruitless, and so we are deprived of one of the most valued and most vital privileges of the Order.’ He added that local disputes flared up too quickly for American Knights to mediate them by letter.

Hill proposed two alternative solutions. The first was to ‘send over, for a year or two at any rate, some accredited member of the General Executive Board, or a representative specially appointed at the ensuing General Assembly.’ This representative, Hill argued, could carry out ‘missionary work at the various industrial centres of Great Britain … could in cases of

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78 Joseph French to Powderly, 16 August 1887, Box 35, TVP; Joseph French to Powderly, September 1887, Box 36, TVP.
79 Joseph French to Powderly, 7 July 1887, Box 30, TVP.
80 Powderly to Campbell, 21 February 1887, Box 96, TVP.
81 Joseph French to Powderly, 16 April 1887, Box 32, TVP.
difficulty speak the final word of the General Executive Board, could be called upon without fear of consequences to plead our cause with employers.’ Such a representative, he insisted, ‘could do more in one year for the rooting and grounding of the Order in this country than we can do in five.’ As an alternative, the Board could ‘appoint a paid man among us beyond the reach of capitalistic vindictiveness for the organizing and mediating functions set forth above.’ In either case, Hill implied that the British assemblies needed American resources, and American representatives, to establish the Order there on a solid foundation. His suggestions gelled with the feelings of American Knights. Many, according to the Washington Post only days before the 1887 General Assembly convened, ‘believed that with the aid of a man of executive ability and oratorical talent a continental contingent of the order might be established which would rival that of the United States.’ Upon reading Hill’s letter, the Assembly authorised Powderly and the General Executive Board to appoint an American Knight to visit Britain and ‘take any further action deemed advisable.’

Powderly initially wanted Colonel John A. Price, a progressive manufacturer and public speaker and a native of his home town, Scranton, to perform that role, but Price declined. Instead, the Knights found their man in the most prominent visitor to the 1887 General Assembly, Michael Davitt, who took part in the gathering as part of a wider tour around the United States to drum up support and money for the Irish cause. Even as the Assembly took place, newspapers opined that ‘the order has in contemplation the securing the services of the Irish patriot in the task of developing the order in Europe.’ The New York Sun claimed that at the Assembly Davitt ‘was made a member of the order and a Knight of Labor organizer,’ that his Irish Land League would become ‘a special district of the Knights of Labor’ and that leading Knights were keeping this secret because of anticipated opposition from English and Scottish Knights. Davitt denied these rumours and insisted that his visit to the United States was simply to advance the Irish cause and promote the sale of Irish wool. The Irish Land League, for its part, certainly remained independent from the Knights

83 Washington Post, 6 October 1887.
85 Jesse Chapman to Powderly, 12 May 1888, Box 44, TVP.
86 Washington Post, 6 October 1887. Similar reports appeared in Britain too: for example, Manchester Guardian, 8 October 1887.
87 New York Sun, 12 October 1887. The article did not explain whether the English and Scottish Knights were immigrants to the United States or were actually based in those countries.
88 Birmingham Daily Post, 21 October 1887.
The rise of a Transnational Movement

of Labor. But the idea was not new. George Schilling had proposed it to *John Swinton’s Paper* a year earlier. *Reynolds’s Newspaper* publicly appealed to Davitt to lead an organisation of unskilled English workers, modelled on the Knights, in July 1887.89

The opportunity for Davitt to work on behalf of British Knights came the following May. In that month Jesse Chapman, the Master Workman of Smethwick’s LAr10227, planned to hold a public meeting to celebrate the first anniversary of his assembly and raise the Order’s public profile in Birmingham and the Black Country. Chapman asked Davitt to speak at the meeting and Davitt agreed, as Chapman told Powderly, ‘almost gleefully.’ Chapman asked the General Master Workman (GMW) to provide Davitt with ‘a kind of socio-political programme of ideas upon which our energies as an Order in this country might expend themselves for a few years to come,’ and which could form the basis of his speech.90 Powderly did so, and on 8 May 1888, Davitt, the Revs. T.T. Sherlock and Harold Rylett, the English radical William Clarke and Richard McGhee, the Scottish single-taxer, gave speeches to an audience of more than 1,000 Knights and their families at Smethwick Public Hall. Chapman judged the meeting a ‘magnificent success,’ and it appeared in newspapers all over Britain and Ireland.91 The meeting marked the British Order’s transition from ‘an organisation which has grown quietly and extensively in the Black Country during the last few years,’ as the *Birmingham Daily Post* observed the day after, to an order that seemed to have a future in British social and political life. It also encouraged many workers to join the assemblies, partly because those who wished to hear Davitt speak had to become Knights to do so. According to statistics provided at the 1888 General Assembly, more than 1,200 workers joined DA208 and DA248 between January and August of that year.92

Michael Davitt served for a brief time as the Master Workman of DA208 after his speech at Smethwick, before his other duties and causes took him away. American Knights soon sent another prominent Irishman across the ocean, James Archibald, who lived in New York and headed the Order’s National Trade District 210, representing paper hangers across the United States. Archibald came to visit relatives in Ireland in 1889; he also came to Britain and Ireland with a commission from Powderly to organise ‘such worthy persons as may present themselves to him during his stay there.’93

89 *Reynolds’s*, 10 July 1887.
90 Jesse Chapman to Powderly, 3 March 1888, Box 41, TVP.
91 Jesse Chapman to Powderly, 12 May 1888, Box 44, TVP. The Dublin *Freemen’s Journal*, for instance, carried more or less the entire address on 9 May 1888.
93 Circular from Powderly, 17 June 1889, Box 101, TVP.
Knights Across the Atlantic

Where Davitt’s fame attracted workers to the assemblies, Archibald brought many workers into the Order through hard work and strong lungs. According to one report, between June and October 1889, he delivered no less than 70 speeches in various parts of the British Isles.\(^94\) His visit to Liverpool spurred the early growth of LA\(_{443}\) there.\(^95\) He gave the main address at the Order’s first public meetings in Walsall and Rotherham.\(^96\) He spoke to audiences in Scotland during the early days of the Glasgow assemblies.\(^97\) His speeches also bolstered the morale and the numbers of assemblies around Birmingham.

James P. Archibald became a crucial figure at the very point when it seemed as though assemblies might appear in all the major industrial centres of Britain. His work played an equally crucial part in helping British Knights to reach their peak membership of around 10,000. General Secretary-Treasurer Hayes claimed at the 1889 General Assembly that the Order’s extension into Scotland and Ireland and ‘a large increase in membership in England’ was ‘largely due to the efforts of Brother James P. Archibald.’\(^98\) Local Knights, as Henry Pelling writes, ‘might have resented the attribution of their success so fully to Archibald, rather than to their own efforts,’ but they certainly betrayed no resentment to Archibald himself.\(^99\) He told Powderly that Thomas Dean and C.W. Butler, the Master Workmen of DA\(_{208}\) and DA\(_{248}\), ‘vied so much with one another’ for his attention that ‘I feared I would be unable to please them both.’\(^100\) Knights from all over Birmingham, the Black Country and South Yorkshire treated him to a lavish farewell dinner in September, where they praised Archibald’s ‘strong individuality, combined with and made more powerful by a magnetic temperament, distinctly manifestly unbounded sympathy and a high and lofty purpose,’ and presented him with a marble timepiece inscribed with their thanks.\(^101\) Archibald urged Powderly to write to Dean, Butler and Chapman to thank them for their hospitality, and he did so several months later.\(^102\) He also

\(^94\) *Bootle Times*, 28 September 1889.

\(^95\) Bean, ‘Knights in Liverpool,’ pp. 70–71.

\(^96\) In the three towns mentioned, reports of Archibald’s speeches can be found in: *Bootle Times*, 6 July 1889; *Walsall Observer*, 31 August 1889; *Rotherham Advertiser*, 31 August 1889.


\(^99\) Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 327.

\(^100\) James P Archibald to Powderly, 20 October 1889, Box 56, TVP.

\(^101\) *JUL*, 14 November 1889.

\(^102\) Powderly to J Chapman, 5 March 1890, Box 100, TVP; Powderly to C.W. Butler, England, 6 March 1890, Box 100, TVP; Powderly to Thomas Dean, 6 March 1890, Box 100, TVP.
told the *Birmingham Daily Post* near the end of his tour that ‘my mission has been successful beyond my most sanguine expectations.’

Archibald, as did Denny and Davitt before him, proved that it was possible to build a transnational working-class movement on British soil. The British and Irish assemblies only reached over 10,000 members and founded assemblies in most parts of Britain and Ireland due to their efforts and the money that American Knights brought with them. We might share Robert Weir’s frustration that the most committed working-class internationalists tend to have the least money behind them. We can only speculate as to what might have been achieved if American Knights had been able to spare more money and manpower for the British and Irish assemblies. We can say, however, that with an investment of perhaps £1,000 in total and three organisers, Denny, Davitt and Archibald, the Knights became a movement of national significance in the home of trade unionism itself. That is not all. The last two named individuals, in particular, exposed a wider Irish-British-American nexus at the centre of the history of the British and Irish Knights. That particular transatlantic connection brought the Knights into contact with three major themes in British and Irish history: race, religion and empire.

**Race, Religion and Empire**

The Knights of Labor are justly recognised, for all their shortcomings, as the first major American working-class movement to organise extensively across the colour line. Drawing on the rich tradition of antebellum abolitionism, the still potent memory of the Civil War and the emancipation that came out of it, and the practical realisation that many employers set white against black workers to the detriment of both, Knights organised black workers as equal members. In the mid-1880s the latter accounted for a full 10 percent of the Order’s total membership. That does not mean, of course, that Knights were colour-blind or even free of racial prejudice. Most black Knights, especially but not only in the South, organised in their own assemblies. Real unity between black and white Knights remained the exception rather than the rule, as Peter Rachleff documented in his study of black labour in Richmond, Virginia, and was usually a fleeting thing. The Order’s record on Asian workers, as we saw in Chapter 1, was almost uniformly bad. Yet the Knights represented the racial diversity of the American working class much more than their predecessors or, indeed, their successor, the American

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103 *Birmingham Daily Post*, 31 August 1889.

The American labour movement would not match the proportion of black workers organised into the Order for at least half a century. Scholars have only just begun to fully document the rich history of people of colour in Britain, which went back far before the nineteenth century. This history was larger and more significant, and British society much more racially and ethnically diverse, than earlier historians generally assumed. The colour line that did (and does) prove so crucial in the United States, however, did not yet exist in Britain itself. British and Irish Knights were thus able to avoid that particular question in an immediate way. Their letters to the *Journal of United Labor*, their correspondence with headquarters, the reports of their meetings and speeches, and newspaper coverage of their activities do not refer to racial questions once. Knights in North America and the rest of the colonial world faced serious questions concerning Asian immigration, the status of indigenous peoples and other people of colour. Their responses to all these questions differed sharply from colony to colony, and between those colonies and assemblies in the United States. British and Irish Knights, by contrast, avoided any mention of them whatsoever.

At first glance, that fact precludes us from saying anything meaningful about the British and Irish Knights on the subject of race. Recent scholarship on that subject, however, suggests that race was at the heart of the formation and reformation of national and imperial identities among the British working class, even when nobody thought to say it aloud or in print. Over the course of the nineteenth century at least some British workers developed a national identity based on the exclusion of certain racial groups, particularly those of African and Asian descent, as Britain extended or expanded its control over large parts of the world. This exclusionary attitude even seeped at times into parts of the socialist movement, for all its protestations of internationalism and the fraternity of workers all over the globe. Jonathan Hyslop suggests that white workers, primarily but not only of British descent, formed an ‘imperial white working class,’ bound together and defined as much by colour as class, which stretched from Britain to South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and perhaps the United States as well. Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds further argue that white people

106 Racist attitudes were not, of course, uniform across the British socialist movement. See Kirk, *Comrades and Cousins*, especially ch. 3.
The rise of a Transnational Movement across the European empires, from all social classes, drew a global colour line that marked themselves off from their supposed racial inferiors at home as well as abroad.\textsuperscript{108} Carl Nightingale has traced the concrete expression of that line through the rise of segregated cities all over the globe.\textsuperscript{109}

Without the sources to interrogate them properly, these attitudes and actions must remain in the background of the Order’s British and Irish history. Another racial or ethnic group that played a crucial role in the Order’s history in Britain and naturally in Ireland, however – the Irish – provides us with a more solid point of connection between that history and questions of race and empire. Satnam Virdee, among others, casts Irish immigrants and their descendants as the original ‘racialized other’ in British labour history. They were, he writes, at once outsiders in British industrial life, increasingly caricatured over the course of the nineteenth century in crudely racial terms. But they were also militant insiders at various points within the British labour movement. From Bronterre O’Brien, the ‘Chartist schoolmaster,’ to James Sexton, the dockers’ leader during the ‘new unionism’ of the early 1890s (and briefly a Knight himself), Irish immigrants played a crucial and leading (yet underappreciated) role in the nineteenth-century British labour movement, even as they were often excluded from what we might call the imagined British working-class community over the same period.\textsuperscript{110}

Historians of American labour, by contrast, have never missed a chance to point out the enormous contribution of the Irish diaspora to working-class movements in the United States. Irish immigrants and their descendants comprised a disproportionately large fraction of trade union members all through the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{111} The Knights of Labor exemplified that trend. Terence Powderly often combined his duties as General Master Workman with agitation on behalf of a variety of Irish nationalist groups and, in this sense at least, he was not an atypical Knight.\textsuperscript{112} Powderly wrote to Davitt, before the 1887 General Assembly, of his desire to ‘have that body speak out in favour of Home Rule for Ireland.’ The Assembly did not disappoint him. After Davitt spoke, the delegates clambered over one

\textsuperscript{112} Powderly, \textit{The Path I Trod}, pp. 177–82.
another to introduce resolutions supporting Home Rule and praising Davitt himself in the most effusive possible terms. It would be an overstatement to describe the American Knights as in some way an Irish movement, but the influence of Irish immigrants and the cause of Irish independence permeated the Order from Powderly on down.

The British assemblies certainly attracted many Irish immigrants, or workers of Irish descent, to their ranks. Although it is not possible to put a precise number on it without access to the membership rolls, there is no doubt that the Birmingham and Black Country assemblies contained a disproportionately large fraction of Irish workers. Many of the other places where Knights at least briefly established a powerful local presence, from Liverpool to Glasgow to the west of Scotland, also contained large Irish immigrant communities. Scottish-Irish radicals threatened to form assemblies of the Knights of Labor in 1888 unless Scottish Liberals supported Home Rule, and the Glasgow assemblies were led by at least one of those radicals, James Shaw Maxwell, while another, John Ferguson, addressed Knights at Derry in 1890. The assemblies at Hoyland and Platts Common, near Barnsley, seem even to have been joint ventures between the Knights of Labor and local chapters of the Irish National League. Organisers such as Archibald and Davitt, both born in Ireland, paid special attention to the concerns of Irish immigrants in their work for the Knights around Britain.

The greatest of all of these concerns was religion. The Knights had a long and stormy relationship with the Catholic Church, which banned secret orders like the Freemasons and initially proscribed the Knights of Labor. Uriah Stephens, after all, borrowed freely from Masonic practices, including Biblical references in the Order’s early ritual and meetings with a Bible laid open in the centre of the hall. Stephens was a Baptist and possibly held bigoted attitudes toward Catholics. His Catholic successor, Terence Powderly, on the other hand, tried to secure good relations with the Church after Jesuits in Quebec, and then in parts of the United States, began to refuse the sacraments to members of the Knights of Labor in the

113 Powderly to Michael Davitt, 6 April 1888, Box 99, TVP; Proceedings of the GA (1887), pp. 1835–42.
114 Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 321.
116 Young, ‘Changing Images,’ p. 83; JUL, 13 February, 1890.
117 Mexborough and Swinton Times, 21 November 1890.
The rise of a Transnational Movement

early 1880s. He found two allies in Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore and Cardinal Henry Manning of London, both of whom successfully pressed the Order’s case at the Vatican in 1886 and 1887. Where religious matters were concerned, the Knights never caught a break. As soon as the Church withdrew its ban, a number of Protestant nativist organisations suggested that the Knights represented a front for Catholic conspiracies across the United States. But the Knights never had to face a hostile Church, although they continued to face opposition from individual clergy, at the same time as the enormous power of employers and the state.

Archibald made the rapprochement between the Knights and the Church a key theme of his speeches. At Walsall, ‘he wished particularly to say that the Knights of Labour had the full approbation of the Holy Catholic Church, of which he was a member.’ At Smethwick, he asserted that ‘the aims of their organisation were as legitimate as could be desired by the Catholic Church,’ that Knights ‘preached no heresy’ and assured non-Catholic listeners that their order was truly ecumenical. Archibald’s message had an effect in some assemblies. Knights in Liverpool won the direct support of local clergy, and Dr Bernard O’Reilly, the Catholic Bishop of Liverpool, maintained what Ronald Bean describes as ‘cordial’ relations with the Knights of LA. In any case, religion did not divide the English assemblies. Knights in the Birmingham area found allies among Congregationalist and Methodists ministers like Sherlock and Rylett, even though many of them were Irish and Catholic. In Scotland, where sectarianism remained a potent force, the picture is less clear. The history of the Sons of Labour, an order modelled on the Knights among Lanarkshire coal miners between 1888 and 1890, and explored in the following chapter, suggests that religious differences caused problems for the Scottish assemblies.

The main attraction of the Order for Irish workers, however, was summed up by Michael Davitt in his speech at Smethwick in 1888. ‘The Knights of Labor is not an American society, or an Irish society or an English society,’ Davitt claimed:

It is a society of all of these and more. By its aid here in England we are enabled to meet on common ground for the first time and to each of us is

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118 Ware, Labor Movement, pp. 73–102.
119 Labour Tribune, 31 August 1889.
120 Smethwick Telephone, 10 August 1889.
121 Bean, ‘Knights in Liverpool,’ p. 71.
122 Only one Scottish journal seems to have seen the Knights as tools of a wider Catholic conspiracy. See The National Observer, and British Review of Politics, Economics, Literature, Science, and Art, 15 March 1890 and 11 November 1893.
123 Frame, America and the Scottish Left, pp. 129–55.
given the great privilege of taking a member by the hand and calling him brother regardless of his country, creed, or condition in life.  

Davitt thus advertised the assemblies as places where workers of all nationalities, Irish included, could find a home within a wider, truly international movement. The fact that the Order’s headquarters lay in Philadelphia rather than London meant that the British imperial model, which subordinated Irish interests to English ones, would not be replicated by the Knights of Labor. Knights promised to bridge the main racial chasm in the nineteenth-century British working class by substituting internationalism for the British Empire, even if they could not always make good on this promise.

These powerful ideas certainly explain why the British assemblies attracted many Irish immigrants. What, then, about everyone else? There is no evidence that English workers viewed the Order as an Irish or Catholic front, and there is absolutely no evidence that the Order’s enemies in the labour movement or the local press used the Irish question to attack the assemblies. Some newspapers did see American Knights as an unwelcome extension of Irish terrorism, yet others, such as *Reynold’s*, were attracted to the Knights precisely because they strongly supported Irish Home Rule.  

It is possible, of course, that the Order’s Irish connections limited its prospects without anyone ever having said so openly. The Scottish assemblies probably faced splits and attacks from the outside on national as well as religious grounds. On balance, however, it appears that the British-Irish-American nexus worked to the benefit of the British assemblies.

What we can be sure of is that sectarianism became a major issue for Knights across the Irish Sea. We have, after all, been discussing the Irish-American connection without even referring to Ireland itself. Partly that is due to the late appearance of assemblies there. As late as December 1889, the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* observed that ‘efforts at organizing the K. of L. in Ireland have so far not been attended with conspicuous success.’ This was an odd state of affairs given the close association that existed between Ireland and the Order, especially after Michael Davitt spoke on behalf of the Birmingham assemblies in May 1888. But Davitt stated very clearly that he ‘would not countenance the establishment of any society that might become opposed to the [Irish] National League,’ and refused to organise

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126 *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 7 December 1889.
any Irish assemblies.\textsuperscript{127} It took the former Master Workman of an assembly in Columbus, Georgia, to convince workers in Belfast to form an assembly of the Knights of Labor in 1888.\textsuperscript{128} Other assemblies in Belfast and Derry followed in 1889. Once formed, Davitt did speak at a meeting of Derry’s LA1601 at the start of 1890, where he expressed his ‘pride that the son of an Irish workingman should become the head of the greatest labor organization of the world.’\textsuperscript{129}

Religion did cause problems for the Irish assemblies. When Michael M’Daid, an official of LA1601, lamented the poor attitude the local clergy displayed towards the Knights, Davitt reminded his audience that ‘despite all the efforts that had been made, not a word of condemnation or of censure of the Order of the Knights of Labor had ever been uttered by the Holy Father.’\textsuperscript{130} In Northern Ireland, however, a papal seal of approval alienated Unionists and Protestants as much as it attracted Irish Nationalists and Catholics. Protestant and Unionist members of Belfast’s LA418 accused R.H. Feagan, its first secretary and a Catholic and staunch nationalist, of using the assembly for his own political purposes. They soon forced him to resign. The Knights of LA1601 were more successful in their attempts to negotiate what John Boyle describes as the ‘religio-political battleground’ of Derry, but as they found that sectarian rifts widened as they faced difficulties of other kinds.\textsuperscript{131} Sectarianism did not destroy the assemblies in Belfast and Derry. The blame for their destruction rested with failed strikes, rival unions and financial problems, which appear in subsequent chapters. But sectarianism created unnecessary rifts among the membership and accelerated the decline of the Irish assemblies once it began to set in.

In England, in Scotland and in Ireland, then, the Knights grappled with racial, religious and imperial questions in different ways and with different results. In all three countries Irish immigrants, that original racialised other of the British labour movement, flocked to the Order’s assemblies in their hundreds. Their presence seems to have caused no problems in England and some problems in Scotland, while religious sectarianism played a predictably important role in Ireland. On balance, the Irish connection served the British and Irish assemblies well. It is a pity that so little, aside from the name, survives of the Jewish émigré ‘Knights of Labour’ that briefly existed in London’s East End, for Jewish immigrants rivalled the Irish for the title

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{127} Birmingham Daily Post, 21 October 1887.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Boyle, Irish Labour Movement, pp. 104–06.
\item \textsuperscript{129} JUL, 13 February, 1890.
\item \textsuperscript{130} JUL, 13 February, 1890.
\item \textsuperscript{131} McAteer, ‘New Unionism in Derry,’ pp. 12–13; Boyle, Irish Labour Movement, pp. 104–06.
\end{itemize}
of the archetypal racial ‘other’ during our period. We can say, however, that
the Knights promised to evade the unequal, imperial relationships between
Britain and Ireland, and Irish immigrants and their host communities
in Britain, by appealing to internationalism instead. The fact that the
Order was American, without any direct connection to British imperialism,
doubtless gave this appeal more credence. It would not be going too far to
say that the Knights of Labor were the best placed, of any major working-
class movement of their time, to attract and organise Irish immigrants in
Britain and their compatriots in Ireland. That surely ranks as one of the main
reasons behind their success.

Conclusion

On 19 November 1889, the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor
convened in Atlanta, Georgia. The delegates began their deliberations at a
time when the Order’s American assemblies faced serious challenges, the
greatest of which was a sharp decline in membership after the heady days
of the Great Upheaval. Yet these same delegates represented an order whose
international network of assemblies continued to extend into new countries
and continued to grow in many existing ones. The Atlanta Constitution,
understandably keen to highlight the significance of all major events that
took place in the city, described the gathering as ‘the general assembly
of the world.’ As the Constitution pointed out, the General Assembly
brought ‘two or three hundred delegates from all parts of the United States,
Canada, England, Germany, France and Austria, Belgium and Australia.’132
Terence Powderly oversaw an order in decline at home but advancing
everywhere else. That contradiction forms a major part of the final chapter of
this book.

The General Assembly at Atlanta also coincided with the high point
of the Order’s assemblies in Britain and Ireland. Knights had finally
established a presence in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and they
found lodgement in important industrial commercial centres like Liverpool,
Glasgow and Belfast, in other centres like Rotherham, Walsall, Derry and
Derby, as well as their early bases in Birmingham, the Black Country,
St Helens and Sunderland. In late 1889 or early 1890 they reached their
peak membership of around 10–15,000. Thomas Dean told a meeting of
DA208 in August 1889 that in England ‘we have made some great steps in
advance, but have also in some cases lost ground.’ Dean urged his listeners
to ‘only practice what you teach and profess, and we must win, perhaps not

all at once, but in good time.' A year later, in October 1890, Michael Davitt welcomed ‘the growing feeling of international brotherhood among the workers of the world,’ and gave as his main example ‘the growth of responsive friendly feeling among American workingmen towards the working classes in England’ through the Knights of Labor. ‘Assemblies of the Knights of Labor are increasing day by day in these islands,’ he wrote. Davitt probably had little knowledge of the difficulties and reversals that began to chip away at their numbers after 1889. But the tone of cautious optimism that he and Dean both struck reflected a wider feeling among many Knights at the turn of the decade.

They had some reason for that feeling. Among English glassworkers, among craftsmen and unskilled workers in a variety of trades around Birmingham and the Black Country, and among workers in many different parts of Britain and Ireland towards the end of the 1880s, the Knights of Labor capitalised on important deficiencies in local labour movements. Their assemblies flourished where trade unions were weak, where agitation for new and improved organisations was strong, where Knights recruited capable and committed leaders, and where they won some wider local support. The struggles of the Great Upheaval increased the Order’s appeal to British and Irish workers still further, even if the Upheaval also ensured that Knights received a hostile reception from most corners of the press.

The direct assistance of the American Knights also encouraged their growth. Financial aid remained relatively small but had an important psychological effect; indeed, many workers probably joined the assemblies because they imagined that the Knights had the money to match their million American members. Correspondence with the general officers and through the *Journal of United Labor* also maintained the important belief among British and Irish Knights that they remained an integral part of an international movement; and though Richard Hill insisted that they needed American boots on the ground, to borrow a contemporary phrase, Powderly ensured that Michael Davitt and, most crucially of all, James P. Archibald, arrived to augment the work of local organisers.

Their Irish and Catholic roots appealed particularly strongly to the many workers, in Britain as well as Ireland, who shared them. To paraphrase Davitt, the Order was very much an Irish as well as an American society, although it was also more than that. The Order’s success among the Irish raises the possibility that global movements from abroad can, in the right circumstances, bring racially, nationally or religiously divided groups together...
in a way that local movements often cannot. American Knights, many of whom were themselves Irish or of Irish descent, had an advantage over their British rivals. They approached British workers from outside the Empire and outside the imperial framework that subordinated Irish to British interests. American Knights rejected that framework. They also retained the sympathy for Irish Home Rule or independence which many British trade unionists let go after the end of the Chartists. This sympathy served them well as they formed assemblies throughout England and into Scotland and Ireland.

Many of these themes had an influence felt well beyond the British and Irish assemblies. Radicals and trade unionists did not need to become Knights to draw lessons and inspiration from the Order’s record, whether in terms of politics or trade union methods, during the Great Upheaval. Other unions than the Knights also sought to profit from the disorganisation of workers in various regions and occupations, and often came into conflict with the assemblies. Irish immigrants numbered among the members and leaders of those unions and, indeed, we will see that unionised Irish immigrants fought the Knights as well as joined them. Knights in those assemblies, meanwhile, struggled to reconcile the Order’s record during the Great Upheaval with its leaders’ insistence on arbitration instead of strikes. These themes all feature in subsequent chapters. For now, we turn to questions of organisation, culture and gender.